

NO MEMORIAL

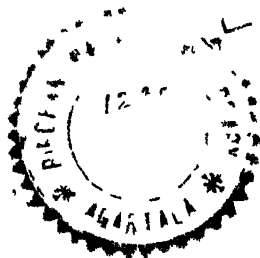
NO MEMORIAL

by

PIERRE FISSON

And some there be, which have no memorial ; who
are perished, as though they had never been ; and
are become as though they had never been born ;
and their children after them.

Ecclesiasticus XLIV 9.



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PART ONE

THE BLOOD-DRENCHED SOIL

THE lieutenant coughed and took off his glasses. We all heard the order to re-establish contact by sending a patrol to look for our tanks, but for record he took it down in shorthand and then, when the voice over the inter-comm. stopped, wrote it out in long-hand. The sheet of paper lay before him covered with his pointed writing. His pale short-sighted eyes wandered round the tent. We knew that he would make an effort to speak, would fume it and feverishly hand the paper to the sergeant. The sergeant would go over our names in his big head, and there would be a moment's grace for us until he spoke . . . I was opposite the sergeant, our go-between. We had just finished eating and our fingers were still greasy. At the entrance to the tent Rich had lit the camp stove which we used for cooking and it whistled and moaned. I was lying on the ground, and when I raised my eyes I could see the sergeant's nostrils and pointed chin as he sat on the box where we kept the machine-gun belts. His lips were still and I knew he was not thinking but that he was like the rest of us—just a bundle of flesh enjoying the warmth. His lips began to move: it was my name he was turning over in his head. The little Jew from Cincinnati lit a cigarette. The sergeant's lips stopped moving and he sniffed the smoke. It took us a few seconds to realize that the operator was repeating in a monotonous voice the battalion signal number followed by our own.

"Yes?" said the lieutenant.

He got up from his stool and respectfully smoothed out the sheet of paper with the back of his hand

"Yes?" he said again.

"Is that you Higgins?"

"Yes, sir."

We recognized the colonel's voice. A meticulous little man, the colonel, who preferred to imagine us on his regimental files, an endless list with which he could juggle, rather than as real men who were freezing on the extreme north of the front.

"It's all right, we've re-established contact with the battery," he said. "Take a note of their positions."

The lieutenant fumbled in his pack, brought out a map and took down the bearings.

"Then I don't send the patrol, sir?"

Our eyes left the loudspeaker. We stared at the lieutenant. What the hell had his goddam mother ever taught him?

"That seems clear enough to me, lieutenant," said the colonel.

"Yes, sir,"

Cincinnati yawned. "O.K. by me," he said.

"What's O.K. by you?" asked the sergeant. "You won't get out of the next patrol."

The lieutenant turned clumsily on his seat. His long fingers slipped into his tunic and reappeared with a packet of cigarettes. He began to laugh. "Ha, ha, ha, the joke's on you. You'll think I'm a bastard." His laugh was vicious. "Ha, ha, ha!" None of us had had a smoke since the night before, except the little Jew from Cincinnati and the lieutenant. "Catch!" he said, throwing the packet to the sergeant.

Rich made me a sign over the sergeant's head. When the packet reached me I took out two, put one in my mouth and dropped the other in my sleeve.

In the late afternoon the six mobile guns and the three tanks which had been firing in front of us showed up. At dawn the day before they had stopped firing and the battalion had lost contact with them. Their dark forms

were outlined black against the snow. It was not snowing now but the wind, sweeping down from the neighbouring hilltops, brought with it a fine powder which swirled in the darkness. After the trucks and the guns had passed the three tanks which were still in the wood got into communication with us. They stopped when they reached the bridge we were guarding, the last one opened its turret and a figure appeared.

"Where are you going?" asked the sergeant.

The man did not answer.

"You'll get us all frozen," grumbled a voice inside the tank.

"Well?" repeated the sergeant.

Night had now fallen. The first part of the convoy had stopped on the other side of the bridge.

"We're taking up positions behind you," the man said at last.

"What? Isn't there anyone ahead?"

"No, you're going to be the heroes."

"Hell, and I thought we were going to advance!"

The motors of the tanks purred in the night and all round us was a smell of burning oil.

It was the night of 24th November, and that was how No. 4 Company of the Fifth Regiment of the First American Division found itself quite alone at the head of the front before a sleeping army. No doubt it was that night for the first time that I felt a need to confide in someone and find some support outside myself. I was still a long way from knowing that the loneliness which lay ahead would lead me to try and write. Nothing had yet happened violent enough to destroy in one blow the fragile defences I had brought with me from over the water. The strange thing is that the beauty of that night, revealing my loneliness, awakened in me a taste for the splendours of life, but later it was the dead and the battles

which, having brought me to the depths of misery, gave me the courage to undertake this story. I had behind me no experience which could help me in this effort—quite the contrary—but what did that matter, since I did not even know whether I could make myself understood, whether I could transmit to my readers even a mere echo of the cries of those who go to war.

My name is Joseph B. Jewell, and I was born twenty-four years ago on the Canadian bank of the Great Lake. For two generations my father's family lived south of Chicago on the vast plains which had been turned into farms. But if two generations had made of my father a genuine American, his father had not quite forgotten that his forbears came from the Dutch lowlands and that inevitably his blood bore the traditions of Europe. Sometimes when I went with him to watch the horse or mule teams coming from the plough he would stop at the edge of a field. His trembling hand would let go mine and something strange, like a mask, would show on his face. It was not merely a passing cloud in the sky. Later I realized that at the end of winter, with the thaw, the first traces of green that pierced the soil recalled imperiously old landscapes and forgotten odours. But my grandfather had a deep admiration for his son, who never let himself be troubled by his origins and the mysteries of life.

Yes, my father was as much American as the new soil which the ploughs turned over every year in our fields. And yet despite himself, when my grandfather died and his body was buried in the middle of the property, all his lands rose up round my father like a prison of which he was at the same time master and slave. One day he crossed the lake, leaving behind him all those who spoke his language, and made his way to the cold regions as if it were possible for him to reach, in that direction, the lowlands where the windmills turned.

My mother was a young girl from Metz who had been sent to Canada to see her cousins. A prey to some strange sensibility, my father reacted strongly to her ; that is to say he carried off by force this young French girl who still hardly understood English. The only assurance she could get from him was that they should stay in Canada until she had delivered to the world what she carried in her belly. Obviously my mother's wish was to give birth to me in a land where they spoke her own language, but it was not strong enough to make of me anything else but an American. On the contrary any effort on her part to awaken in me a curiosity about what she called "her country" merely aroused my hostility, which continued until the day she died. For several months my father and I thought we were free of her. This death effaced from his life an act which had been forced upon him and which was like a backward step in the course of national virtues. The period of mourning was hardly over before he married what he called a real American girl. I was fourteen. The morning they returned from their honeymoon she lined up the servants in front of the house and spoke to them like a woman of my country. Before she had finished and my delighted father bent down to kiss her hair, I realized what I had just lost: I knew that I should have to struggle not to let myself be drawn into their clan, and I sensed that somewhere I should find the path my mother had wanted to reveal to me. I was still too young, too eager and above all too weak. I did as they all do in my country—I let myself go, putting off till tomorrow and the next day the birth of my true conscience, and thus with each year letting the layers of dead leaves which fell from our trees obscure more and more my mother's image. I could not foresee what devious paths would lead me to discover my true self.

To be honest, I must admit that I have only lived for the

last four months, and that the whole of the rest was a mess. So I really have nothing to say about the twenty-three years and some months prior to where we are today. Not that my life was a blank page or that I did not do despicable things which I would rather not recall. No, far from it. I lived according to the rules and habits of the people who surrounded my childhood. I lived according to their laws and profited by their advantages. Because I was in the world and I was made of flesh and blood, and because my blood came from various climes, I knew desires and joys; but I had never lived as a man, had neither been satisfied nor happy. At each twilight, before closing my eyes, I hoped that at last I should start to live tomorrow. And when dawn heralded a new day and gave me my life again I knew that it still would not be that day.

But I was young and there were plenty more dawns, and I cheated once more. Of course I loved. I loved the soil, the wind and the flowing water. Of course I loved, and I lusted too. I never let a summer pass without finding some girl to tumble in the corn. I made love and rolled in the grass; I kissed a mouth as young as my own; but there was no sense in any of my gestures. What I wanted was to stupefy myself, to banish what I had no chance of obtaining, my own peace of mind.

The life of a man is not bounded by his lands but by his contact with other men. I profited by all the facilities which my father, his father and grandfather had acquired, and I do not regret it, for one does not regret the waves a stone makes when you throw it in the water. For nothing remains of that, absolutely nothing. I cheated, lied and thieved, but I never broke our laws and I still bear their deep imprint just the same. I rebelled, but there again I could not distinguish between desire and reason. It would have been like an experience in which one always walks backwards. I caressed rebellion as one caresses a

woman one pays, without assuming any responsibility. If, despite it all, I did not abandon this kind of silent struggle with myself it was because at each moment when I opened my eyes other men were on their way at my side—other men who paid with their loneliness and their blood for what had been given so easily to me. What have I found ? Well, what could one find ? Nothing except oneself. But what one can find is the end of fear. That is my whole story: to become a man I have had to kill my fears. I am still not very adroit and too many thoughts buzz in my head. Life is too simple and yet too complicated, and to become aware of what I am, I had to learn to accept my death. I am twenty-four and I should like to be born again, to live again, to die and to live again once more. I should like my courage to be reborn, whatever deadlocks I come up against. I am twenty-four and my name is Joe B. Jewell. I have learnt many things in a few months and that is what I should like to express. I have touched so many new things that life has suddenly become greater for me. But I learnt them in a war, and there is nothing gentle, tender, beautiful or good in war. War is where men kill each other and where the sky leaves no escape hole. There is nothing exciting in war, nothing noble, nothing heroic, and there's no glory. Only a long, painful and hideous crime whose echo increases with time.

* * *

The 24th November. I had been in Korea for forty days. That night for the first time the knot which I had in my throat ever since I joined the army had loosened.

I was alone on watch and the others were all asleep. Rich should have been at my side. The day before I could not have stood the loneliness. There were also new orders which forbade us to mount guard alone ; but that night it was different. After the convoy had passed the

wind fell. We listened to them making their way to the rear in the dark and silent night. Higgins the lieutenant was terribly afraid—afraid of the situation, afraid of having to do something and not knowing how to do it. I understood him, or rather I had begun to understand him, and perhaps it was from that that everything started.

The sky had grown whiter. When you looked through the trees ahead you got the impression of seeing twinkling stars, but they were only piles of snow gleaming on the tree trunks. Looking at the road where the convoy came down you could imagine shapes leaping from tree to tree, but there was no one, only the snow crushed by the convoy. In spite of the cold the air was almost soft; everything was wrapped in cotton wool, silent and peaceful. Rich had stayed in the tent. He was asleep. No one would come tonight. There was something very beautiful in this sleeping forest which constricted your chest and wanted to gush from your lips like a wave. I had known nights like this, just as deep, when fleeting clouds passed like gossamer threads across the sky: at home on the farm it snows just like this and winter strips the trees. For the first time for many days I was happy. Nothing could happen to us. We were alone. In front of us was the enemy. The entire world ceased to exist. Until the moment when our tanks and guns, as they retreated, passed in front of us we could make any suppositions we liked. Now that was over. How many days would it go on? I did not know. No one knew anything. With a little imagination I felt like a man who was going to assist at his own funeral. The night was so beautiful. Why were we going to die?

* * *

Night passed. A cold milky day was upon us. Why did I struggle to awaken in myself a memory of all I had known? We were all afraid. We thought the day would

bring us some comfort, but we were wrong. At night you see nothing and you imagine so many things that after a moment the spirit gets lost. Day reconstitutes the exact shape of things in front of you, of everything that hides the death which is waiting to leap on you. The feeling of liberation I experienced the night before on watch evaporated on my relief. I was once more in a deplorable state. When I walked I felt as if my feet were dragging while my head was lost in layers of cotton wool. It was a kind of intoxication which left me without strength or will power. The voices and gestures of the others came to me through a kind of thick fog. When at last I tore myself from this stupor and my mind grew clear for a few moments I let all my old memories dance before my eyes. It was as if I were burying my life once more.

* * *

No. 3 Squad only had eighteen men. The company commanders and squad leaders no longer took into account the regulation number of men in their units and for several days they were all trying to find as many soldiers as possible. Nobody mentioned those who died on the way. All that remained of them were their identity discs, which one by one went to swell the pockets of the sergeant. Each day the appearance of new figures created a sensation of unreality. We drifted. Since mid-November we had been part of Colonel Cooper's troops. He had taken the Manchurian frontier as his objective. The first days of the trip were easy. It was ten and then fifteen degrees below, which did not prevent the trucks from averaging a good speed during the day. When they left our bases neither Cooper nor his staff knew what awaited them in the north. The first days were really war as we understood it—it is strange to see how cowardice adapts itself to the military puppet show. I don't know how many men we were at

the start, but when we rolled across the plains our armoured columns stretched from one horizon to the other. Whenever we halted we knew that our advance guard was meeting with resistance. A few seconds later we heard the echo of a salvo. The ones who got out went to warm their hands on the radiators or the exhaust pipes of the trucks. It did not concern us if they were fighting four or five kilometres away: the truck in front started off and we followed.

During the second night of our trip there was a long halt and the sound of gunfire grew louder. We were in a narrow gorge. Lieutenant Higgins took out a map and after a few calculations told us that the head of the column must have got to the end of the gorge in front of a village. We received strict orders not to light any fires. The wood, metal and everything around us became as cold as the night and there was nothing left to warm ourselves on. We were there for more than an hour and the firing did not stop. The lieutenant tried to take advantage of this to give us a lesson and explain the war. Perhaps he thought he was taking a night class at his university. He sat in the front of the truck where it was warmest and at times, by the light of his lamp, he could see our white faces.

“What are they doing now, do you think?” he asked.

A few men moved and their equipment rattled, but no one replied. Rich was lying on his back at the rear of the truck. Through the open hood he could see a black wall above, something which moved slowly, the sky.

“We’re going to freeze to death,” he said.

Ross and I crawled towards him. He spread his blanket over us and we lay there peacefully waiting for the warmth of our bodies to be felt.

“Pop to!” said the lieutenant. “We must face up to every situation! What do you say, Sergeant?”

Black made a move and dragged out of his throat: "They're attacking, sir."

"Old twat ! "

Ross had uttered the word louder than he thought. Rich began to laugh. Someone in the darkness said sleepily: "If he were one he would at least be warm."

"Hi, where do you reckon you are ? "

Rich laughed quite openly and then Ross and I burst out laughing. The Jew from Cincinnati who had just seen the joke joined in.

"That's good, that's good."

"Where do you reckon you are ? " repeated the lieutenant.

"Can it ! " said Black, coming to the lieutenant's aid.

Above our heads an express train started to rumble. The truck shook with the vibration.

"Planes," said Rich. "They've called for air support."

Five of them went over at short intervals.

"They're ordinary night fighters," said the sergeant. "They're better than jets at night."

Just after that we heard five explosions whose noise was deafening despite the distance. The planes must have regained height for we could now distinctly hear their airscrews threshing the black Korean night.

The convoy got under way and the trucks bumped over the hard snow or skidded on the smooth and icy surface. It was true. As they came out of the gorge our advance guard had come up against the defenders of the village of Miang. The houses were encircled with crackling flames whose red gleams danced over the soil and higher, above the roofs, columns of smoke rose which were blown towards us by the wind. To the roaring of the flames was added the screeching crack of wooden beams caving in. In the snow blackened by the night, on both sides of the

road, there were dark masses which one could recognise as the remains of men.

"Lousy bunch of bastards. There's a heap of Red sons of bitches the less!" said Higgins.

A little later Matthews, who sold lemonade and barley sugar in an amusement park back home, said suddenly: "They're not Reds, they're yellow."

"Red bastards!" said the lieutenant.

"Aw, shucks . . ." said the soldier.

He wanted to say something else but all we could hear was the noise of his teeth chattering.

* * *

Day after day the mountains grew higher and the roads narrower. Our advance guard seemed to be in action more and more often, to the point where we could not distinguish between one skirmish and another. We were now too far from our bases to call for air support. It was decided that the infantry supporting the tanks and the forward artillery should be changed each day so that every unit might get its share of training, just as the lieutenant had given out. For the men of my section and myself this was the beginning of the war.

Matthews was the first to die. One could not even say he was killed. The war devoured him in a breath of wind and lightning.

"Go and look for his identity disc, Jewell," cried the sergeant.

That was how I knew where he was born—on the Pacific coast, near a great dockyard where they built warships. It was our turn to march behind the tanks and we were well up in front of the column. It had been a quiet day. The North Korean partisans considerably attacked the rearguard that day. Only two hours left before we camped for the night and then our job was over! Matthews

was walking behind a tank. At times he hooked himself on to the aerial and let himself be pulled. The sergeant, Rich, Ross and I were marching on the other side of the road behind the second tank. There seemed to be so little danger that the men had opened the turrets and were looking out for peasant women through their binoculars. There was a cry which rose above the noise of the engines. It was an American voice. The sergeant landed on us with his full weight and we toppled over in the snow. Then there was a sharp explosion, not very loud. My eyes were shut and my head was stuffed into my elbow, yet an orange glow danced before my eyes. The nearby tanks stopped their engines and we could feel the silence. Sergeant Black stood on Ross's foot as he got up, and Ross began to swear. Matthews was no more.

The sergeant in charge of Matthew's tank, God alone knows why, felt a need to carry grenades on him inside the tank, which he fastened to the buttonholes of his blouse. He had invented this game to impress the women. He thought he was a buck with his helmet, earphones, microphone round his neck and his long heavy binoculars. It is all so easy, and it carries you away. An adventurer of the century, he puffed out his chest to display his two grenades. Then he leaned over to say something to the soldier who was marching behind his tank, and the serrated edge of the turret caught one of the grenade pins. As he straightened up it was torn from his buttonhole and bounced live on to the steel plates and rolled towards the rear. It was then that he shouted, but he was too late: the grenade had exploded in Matthew's stomach. There was a hole in the snow that reached as far as the rocks.

"Go and look, Jewell . . ."

And I found the disc with his name, his birthplace and his next of kin on it. But that didn't matter. We were advancing towards the north: we were doing something

very great, very magnificent, in spite of the terrible cold and death which, having come to grips with us once, did not leave us again. At this period we might have had the impression we were victors, and although mortally tired of advancing into enemy territory we had not as yet been able to lay our hands on a single living enemy. And that is the way we waged the war—until the 24th November. Four days ago, when they detailed our squad to guard the bridge, we felt that something new and irrevocable was being imposed on us. Colonel Cooper came to see us with his staff. He had not the same happy sporting air as when we started. He was tired. When he got out of his car and came over to us the cold condensed in a mist round his mouth.

“Haven’t slept for two nights,” he said to Higgins.

No one else had slept. It was too cold, too damp, and men were needed for something or other every minute. What one could say was that all this had been Cooper’s idea of reaching the Manchurian frontier. Now he had set the ball rolling he had to find some heroic way of ending it.

Basically each of us sensed a setback—perhaps because it was so quiet around us, perhaps for other deeper reasons.

* * *

Sunday, November 26th. The war was in the hands of expert decorators. A cruel beauty and a majestic cold accompanied them; they were both there to cradle in their arms the dead that we sowed about us. It was almost as though nature, the woods, the rocks, the soil and the sky sensed the bloodshed more deeply than ourselves and gathered up the dead to try and efface their grimacing mouths and rigid features. Despite all our efforts we were the only ones to run amuck, and this landscape which we should have liked to set on fire refused to burn.

How can I express what I felt? I had come from so

far away. My only consolation was the fact that we were all alike.

A hundred yards from the bridge there was a communicating trench dug out of the river bank where Korean workmen once kept their tools. It was a long rathole and you had to bend double to get into it; once you were lying down you could not stretch out full length. Twelve of us slept there. The lieutenant and five others slept a few paces away in a tent hidden by the rocks and the snow. As for our hole it was quite invisible. The earth and walls were frozen; our breaths condensed on them and trickled down on us in drops. Returning from guard I lay down between two bodies, and remained awake until the milky dawn light trickled through the entrance of our hide-out. Later, half asleep, I heard a dull sound as if somewhere the earth had opened. Bits of rock and soil began to fall on our heads. Automatically I got up, groping for my gun in the dark.

"Stay put," said Ross, "we're not going any place. It's the guys who've come to blow up the bridge."

I ought to have reacted and understood what that meant! But, not having to face the torture of going outside, I lay down voluptuously and fell asleep.

* * *

Eleven o'clock in the morning. It was snowing but the flakes were not thick; the wind had dropped, the air was drier and although the barometer had fallen five degrees it was not so cold. In the silence the snow lay on the broken carcass of the bridge. The twisted beams and torn wire were gently covered in a white blanket with rounded curves. At this point the river was rather wide, shallow and dotted with sharp black rocks on which the swirling waters had fastened long icicles. Despite the cold a torrent about thirty feet wide, whose waters bubbled and foamed,

flowed along the middle of the river bed. In places it disappeared beneath a shell of ice, only to reappear farther down with a bound. Behind us on the other side of the river, very far away, the notes of a bugle sounded faintly—probably a battalion on parade, for it was Sunday. Every quarter of an hour the guns which passed the day before, hidden in the woods behind us, fired a salvo over our heads. The snow-laden air dampened the whining of the heavy shells, which flew like black birds in the moving whiteness. By their hiss we could tell how they turned on themselves, and each time they went over we instinctively ducked because one day we knew they would fall on us.

Higgins had flung trees across the stream where there was ice so that we could go from one bank to the other. It would have been more sensible to cross and take up our positions on the other side, with the river in front to protect us, but the lieutenant had received no orders. We were there to defend the bridge, and a bridge has to be defended from the front! There was no more bridge, only a faintly broken line which lay on a bed of rocks and ice, between four pillars with little white roofs. Black tried to stop Rich lighting the camp stoves. The lieutenant did not know what to say. Of course our fires were like fingers pointing towards us. The sergeant didn't want to admit he was frightened.

"You'll use up all our gas."

"In any case," said the lieutenant, "we can't take it with us." He realized what he had just said. "All right, light them. There are none of the bastards here."

The snow fell thicker and the bugle in the forest had stopped. Before the tent entrance the gas burned with a roar. In their hole, under a blanket, their weapons clutched to their bellies, the guards felt the stubble of their beards pricking their cheeks. We were waiting.

Since arriving in this country of mountains and snow each of us had but one idea in his head: to flee. I do not know what kept us there. The day before we had our guns and our tanks in front of us. Although they were still firing we knew that their shells could only throw up snow, break trees or shatter a few solitary rocks. They fired for us and they were part of the decor which we had brought along with us, and without which we were nothing. I thought that those long barrels whose springs always brought them back into place symbolized everything that was false and artificial in us. For our group, for the eighteen of us who were there, the only thing that prevented us fleeing was the river at our backs. I thought too that the invisibility of the enemy and the silence he left us in kept us in a state of anxiety and brought it to such a pitch that the first explosion, the first assault, would fling us into chaos and panic. That may not be very brilliant, but it is war. As I was helping to carry the trunks on to the ice bridge a branch knocked my watch. The glass broke and one of the hands fell in the snow. I listened but the movement had not stopped. I took off my gloves and searched on my knees, sifting the snow handful by handful. Suddenly this watch took on the greatest importance. It represented the time I had brought from home, the time of other days which I had learnt to bear! And then, there was only the lieutenant's watch: in the last five days all the others had stopped, been broken or left behind in the pockets of the dead. My pals got on their knees and helped me look. Only Higgins and Black remained on the bank watching us.

"You're crazy, Jewell," the lieutenant cried.

The icy snow, cutting like a blade, slipped between our fingers. The cold drew a mist around our eyes and stung our flesh. Each time we burrowed the tiny hand might

bury itself deeper, get on the ice and fall into the water.

"Have you got it? Have you got it?"

Fifty yards away Higgins was beginning to get nervous.

"You're nuts. Come back."

Rich nudged me.

"You'll never find it," he said.

I shook my head. I knew that I would stay there until spring, until summer, until autumn, and that I should see a new winter, but I would go on scratching there until I found it. "It can be very useful, a watch," I heard someone say. For them the watch was just that, the hand an additional help in our escape. Without a watch we were quite cut off. There, between my two fingers in the hollow there was something. . . . I could not weigh it or feel its contact but I knew it was there. I had some difficulty putting my fingers in my mouth but I had to do something for my frozen fingers could never have got hold of it. Then I shut my mouth, sucked the snow and at last felt the steel point on my tongue. One by one we stood up. Around us the snow was trampled as in a school playground before the Christmas holidays.

The Jew gave me a box of Chinese matches with a green dragon painted on the lid. Clay, the stretcher bearer, opened a packet of dressings and gave me some of the cotton wool. As soon as the warmth returned to my fingers I fixed the hour hand, then I wrapped the whole watch in cellophane. Clay arranged it on the wool in the matchbox. Rich gave me a sort of canvas pouch which you wear round your neck. I put it on my chest. For a few minutes I felt the cold touch of the material on my flesh and then nothing more.

We were waiting for our turn on guard. During the day nobody liked to be with the lieutenant, although it was warmer in his tent. But no one wanted to listen to the radio or to the voices of our men in the rear. We

were cut off from them and we found their imbecilities quite intolerable. Several times Higgins got Tokio ; once it was dance music and another time a baseball match. Their trumpets, their dances and their masked players didn't concern us any more.

The lieutenant thought that it was because of him we didn't come. No, we were beyond that stage. He didn't mean a thing to us any more, nor did Black, the sergeant. If we stayed on it was because we were waiting for the signal to come from others. Higgins was the same age as myself and the war was not made for him. War only has a meaning when it is waged by men. The snow had stopped ; it was almost light in our tunnel.

Clay was twenty-six. He was neither a Jew, a negro nor a Communist. As he was no good at anything and never had any dough Clay was nothing at all. There was nothing either for or against him. Back home he used to take down on cards the readings of water meters.

He was thin, held himself badly with one shoulder lower than the other and gave off a sort of greyness. When you looked at him the most disagreeable thing was his teeth. They were thick, round, black badly set stumps. People like him, but with slightly more muscle, used to come each summer to work on our farm. One day the foreman brought them : a month or two they could be seen sweating, grinding at a task, then one day they disappeared. When I tried to remember their faces I realized that I had never known their names.

Each time we were on guard together he chattered. He was frightened. But he didn't speak to allay his fear, he spoke like a condemned man who had learnt his sentence by heart and tried indefatigably to solve the mystery. He didn't know that day after day with the rudimentary means at his disposal he was destroying and reconstructing his problem. He didn't know that in everything he did and

said he bore like all of us the whole tragedy of mankind. But if there were many things he didn't know because he had never been taught, then he sensed the mystery. On our first guard alone together I never realized that he was as sensitive and bewildered as myself. At the start he was only a silhouette with a name that rang familiarly, a shape whose depth no one had ever bothered to explore.

It came out perhaps the fourth or fifth time I was on guard with him when we got to the mountainous country. We had stopped at the entrance to a village : there was nothing to do while they were filling up the trucks and the others were eating. Clay had been talking but suddenly fell silent. In spite of the cold he took off his hood and fur cap ; bareheaded he looked at the village, the fields around with the wood behind and in the far distance the mountains towering to the sky. A moment passed and I wasn't certain whether it was he who had spoken. The phrase awoke in me all kinds of sensations. " It's the first time I've ever seen houses, streets and whole fields without hoardings." There was no one near us and it must have been he who said it. For a long time he stayed with his lips closed looking at the first houses and the deserted street and then he began to speak of other things. I was touched by his remark and by the intense thirst I felt in it. Obviously I still had not understood anything, no more than on that Sunday, the 26th November. When one by one all these little things rose before me I was not what I am now. I merely bore myself sturdily. I have lived and I have changed. Before this war I was another person, quite different, so that today in writing I cannot reconstruct from my memories exactly what I was like and what I felt. I am too full of my newly acquired wealth not to want to offer it and at the same time to scatter it on the desert which my life had been until then.

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"How much longer have we got?" asked the Jew from Cincinnati.

"What does that matter for f---'s sake, Yid? You won't save your arse," cried Ross.

"I've got a right to know," said the Jew, without getting excited.

I took out my canvas pouch, the matchbox and at last the watch face. Clay got up from his corner and passed me his torch. There were still twenty minutes before we went on guard.

"We're going to freeze," said Clay, putting the torch back in his pack and sitting down. From another pack he took out some green chalk and began to colour his helmet.

"Are you crazy?" asked Ross. "You can't do that."

"Can't I?" said the other, shrugging his shoulders.

Ross said: "You're a stretcher-bearer. It's got to show."

"And what use is a dead stretcher-bearer?"

He stood up and turned to me.

"In the front line those swine don't wear any badges. Haven't you seen the lieutenant as soon as it gets hot? He has no more bars. I ask you, there's only me wandering about with this decoration on my head."

Quietly, layer after layer, he effaced the two white crosses and the circles on his helmet.

"The arm-band's enough, isn't it? It makes me laugh to be a 'stretcher-bearer,'" he said in an undertone. "A real . . . a real doctor I ought to be. No? Don't you think so?"

"What do you call a real doctor?" I asked him.

"A man who heals," he said with a gesture, "a man who knows, who's not afraid. When they asked for volunteers for stretcher-bearers I leaped at it. It's what I was waiting for, you see. I wanted to know what syphilis

was like and if it can be cured. You know—something different from all the yarns you hear. I wanted it to be without secrets . . . like my water meters. You get me? I've always had it. Once a dentist told me I ought to go to hospital. He said they'd take photos and give me money for them. It's always been with me, something internal. And then the stretcher-bearer's course: four months from hospital to hospital. And I saw different guys and different genitals, and chancres and things that suppurated. I even saw a lot of dames with it too. Yes, it's true, women, and you know, it calmed me. They taught me to use swabs, to wash arses, and then it was different, and the sick ones were all poor bastards like me."

He smiled sadly.

"I knew at once that I was . . . It came from my father or my mother, or perhaps both of them. Hereditary, they call it. It's almost pretty, and it makes you think."

Ross crawled over to us. The box of dressings which Clay had opened was still on the ground with an end of white cotton wool sticking out like an arrow.

"Take that away," he said.

Clay looked at the packet and then at Ross.

"It gives you the shits, doesn't it? It's dehydrated cotton—that's a pretty name too, they've taken the water out of it so that it can suck up the blood."

"You're a mug," said Ross. "It doesn't worry me, but it reminds me of my wife. When she put it on there was always an end that stuck out like that."

"You'd like to ride her now, wouldn't you?" said Clay.

Ross turned over on his back and tried to stretch his legs.

"You're a vicious bastard," he said.

"They can cut mine off for all I care, so long as I get out of here."

"Shush, shush," said Rich behind us. "What language for the heroes of the United Nations ! "

"Bollocks," said Ross.

"C——," replied Rich. "You'll die like a dog."

Clay picked up the open box and put it in his pack.

"You know," he said, turning to me, "I know how to spot them. Hell, there are more than you'd think."

"*I met her on a Sunday*," Rich began to sing. He broke off. "Shit, it is Sunday," he said.

The entrance to the tunnel was blocked out by Black bent double examining us.

"Get ready, it's your watch."

"Why aren't they firing any more ? " asked Ross. "We'd do well to get the hell out of here, wouldn't we, sergeant ? "

"Sergeant ! " came the lieutenant's voice.

Black took a step backwards.

"Make it snappy," he said.

Then we heard the muffled sound of his steps. No one moved and we all tried to find some way to shirk our watch, but we couldn't think of anything. Since we'd been there everybody, including the lieutenant, did watch duty. A few more seconds of sweet warmth ! I knew that as soon as I was out of the tunnel a fog would come down on me and once more I'd be like a drunk.

"You lousy sons of bitches, haven't you finished your f——g daydreams ? "

"Okay," said Rich, "okay . . ."

We were in front of our most advanced post on the right of the road. From there we could watch it as it disappeared into the forest. If they came they could only come from there. We had dug a hole in the frozen ground with our picks, just long and wide enough for two men to lie down in ; there was a narrow parapet to protect our heads and at the side barbed wire which the snow had

completely covered up. The two sentries lay there under a blanket which the snow had also buried. We could only see their two hooded heads and the two red holes of their mouths as they opened and shut. When they had done cursing they lay quiet for a bit, then the one on the left said in a calmer voice: "Joe, get us out of here, we're stiff!"

We lifted the snow off them with our spades and helped them to get up. The heat of their bodies had thawed the earth and there was mud at the bottom of the hole. Rich went and cut some branches which he flung on the mud, and we installed ourselves as comfortably as we could. There was a hole in the parapet for the machine gun to fire through. (The heavy water-cooled ones must have been sent to the rear: as they froze the water burst the cylinders and when you put in anti-freeze they boiled and pissed in your face.) Every five minutes we had to load the gun and play with the mechanism, otherwise the traces of oil froze and caused a jam and we had to put it on the fire to warm it. At night it was most irritating because all round us, from the other holes, came the metallic noise of the sentries loading and unloading their weapons. As supplies did not arrive and we could not waste a shot each time, the majority of our guns were not loaded. It was too cold to smoke, and anyhow with our gloves it was impossible. Nothing to do except watch the bit of road in front, waggle your heels in your boots and feel the leather getting big and cold like caverns minute after minute. Lean your back against the back lying next to you, load the machine gun with the palm of your hand and then pull the trigger by the cord attached, because you couldn't do it with your gloves on. None of that is in the regulations. No doubt you are expected to load delicately and slowly with bare hands, and unload again equally delicately so that the icy steel can bite and punish you. But this

is where the revenge of the damned men begins. The army stops respectfully a thousand yards from the front line. Back there the military police mount guard, and behind them the fine army digests its regulations and its traditions. In front there is the mystery of those who are fighting.

And I loaded and fired, let the string get caught in the trigger, let something break. No, they had a great deal of experience, our machine guns. A few sadistic swine lovingly designed and re-designed them. They were beautiful and pure and they didn't jam any more. The barrel wore a little and with the naked eye you could see how it bulged, but in the box there was a new one and yet another. We should never wear out all the barrels quickly enough. The road was straight and slightly raised, with the forest at the end. The sky was overcast, making the snow gleam. Holding our breaths we heard the stoves outside the lieutenant's tent and to our left very far away, as if at the other end of the world, the growl of a battle. To our right only the heavy silence of winter. They must have been cooking: in front of the tent there was a snow-filled cauldron into which they chucked boxes of canned meat. It had no taste and choked you, but it was warm. We still had two hours to wait. To load and unload that bloody machine gun, fifty, a hundred times, and to feel how cold you could become ! To hide your head in your elbow, lift it up and begin to watch the road again ; to have the urge to get up but remain lying ; to have the urge to say something but remain silent with that interminable fog swirling before your eyes !

" They really got the bridge."

" Yeah."

" You think the frontier's far away ? "

" Twenty miles."

"What are we doing here? When are we going to retire?"

"Aw, shut your yap."

"If only we could retire . . ."

By gluing your ear to the ground you could hear regular thuds. The others were fighting: we were almost lucky. It was Sunday, another Sunday. The forest was silent and the snow gleamed until it hurt the eyes. Something hummed in the sky but we could not see anything. November 26th, 1950. Another few minutes and we should be eating.

I wanted to live. There was no cowardice I was not prepared to commit for that, no words I was not prepared to utter. But I did not speak, did not move, I did nothing. We were animals being teased in our cage. Each one of us was lost and isolated, alone before the carnage. I hated those who had sent me here, I hated them because I was weak and at the very moment I was going to disappear I suddenly wanted to understand. The same anxiety could be seen in all our eyes. It's wonderful, the army, it's wonderful, the war! I couldn't stand them any more, couldn't bear the sight of them any more. The early morning bugle had sounded our death knell. Now more than ever before no drum would give us goose-flesh, no word again, no gesture, would make us believe that we were heroes. We were nuts!

* * *

"Do you want some more?" asked the sergeant.

"Ugh! . . ."

Ross spat out a mouthful of mash and mince.

"I've never met a pig that would eat that stuff."

"Pig or no pig," said the sergeant, "you don't know when you'll next get anything hot."

We were standing in a semi-circle outside the tent. The

heat of the burners had melted the snow and our feet squelched in mud. In the pot of boiling water you could see great bubbles of air bursting. Behind us, near the first pillar under the broken bridge, three men had lit a fire. The dry wood crackled and we could hear the oaths of the men as their joints thawed. During our watch Colonel Carroll Cooper arrived with his staff. The cars came from our right, that is to say from the west. Cooper was apparently very surprised that the bridge had been blown up. They crossed the river on foot and the drivers stayed with the cars on the opposite side.

"What do we do if they come over here?" asked Rich.

We did not move. Like the sentries before us we had got down under the blanket whose one edge we had thrown over the machine gun to protect it from the powdery snow.

"Do we remove the cord? Do we put in the belts?"

Neither of us could make a decision, so we just lay there at the bottom of our hole.

"Well, can you see the road properly from where you are?" Cooper, Higgins and a red-bearded captain stood above us.

Rich said: "Be careful, sir. You don't know what might come from over there."

The three men lowered their shoulders. But as they could not jump into our hole since there was no room and they did not dare to do a belly-flop, they remained crouching.

The colonel then said again: "Well, have you got a good look-out from here?"

"Yes, sir," said Rich.

The lieutenant made a show of wanting to examine the road from our position.

"Let them be," said Cooper.

We were embarrassed lying there like a married couple with those three men standing above us.

" Not too cold, huh ? "

We raised our heads. The movement uncovered our machine gun with the cord attached to the trigger. Cooper looked at it and then at us. He had changed again since the previous day. He was dirty. Only the cold prevented us from realizing how he stank. Rich and I knew that he wouldn't say anything. Before our tanks and guns had crossed the bridge he would have bawled us out. Now he was as broken as we were. The previous day I should probably have been sorry for him, faced with so many shattered illusions, and of course I should have been cowardly enough to have felt like a guilty dog. But now my fear made me detached : he too was only a poor frightened guy. The difference was that he had the right to bawl, to gesticulate and lose himself in a chain of activities, to bend things to his will. He wanted the Manchurian frontier all for himself. For several days he thought it was a match with a little personal victory at the end. Colonel Carroll Cooper, the hero man ! But now he too had his feet in hell. He would get out if it, he would not die. Guys like him had to be given medals and blunder through history. He was broken, tamed, and that was what I had no intention of becoming. His eyes were sad, dark-rimmed, and he was exhausted. Like us he breathed the fog. A swine, yes, a swine. He had no badge on his helmet, no insignia -it was so easy to cheat with yourself.

They walked round our hole and then they left, leaving cigarettes behind. It was not snowing and the sky began to brighten. In places there were patches of blue sky, but it was too late to see the sun. It had already sunk so low that it was hidden behind a clump of trees to the west. Half past three. In a few minutes night would fall. The wood fire near the bridge took on a more violent colour and on all sides, against the snow, shadows grew precise and black. There was a deep silence except for

the noise we made as we moved. This silence disturbed us. The day before we could hear the noise of motors in the rear, a soldier shooting a rabbit ; this morning there was the bugle ; but now there was nothing. As he left Cooper drew a great curtain over us. The food had warmed us through and we were sluggish with digestion. There was still some coffee and the mugs were warm in our hands, but they would be the last scraps of warmth before the morning. We tore open the cigarette packets with our teeth, lit them with numbed fingers, blowing out the first puffs with trembling lips and hands.

Higgins sat at his table. Through the tent entrance you could see the map, and there was enough light to make out the red line which marked the front that evening. Black had gone on his rounds and Higgins was alone. We were standing on the far side of the stoves. I knew how much he wanted us to snap out of our aloofness and enter. Ross took a step backwards, broke away and made for our trench. Clay followed suit, and then the others. There were only Rich, the Jew and myself in front of the open tent. Higgins took off his helmet and looked at us. We saw him without his glasses, and his short-sighted childish eyes seemed to seek a refuge in our company. But that would have been too easy. From now on it was a hunt without dogs. To imagine that the past could be effaced by a sentimental look ! We stood there because it was warm and because we were stiff. With the last puff of his cigarette Rich turned on his heel, so did I, so did Cincinnati and we retired to our lair to huddle on top of each other. What did Higgins see with his short-sighted eyes as he looked into the dark strange night falling about his shoulders ? Three dancing shapes growing smaller in the distance. The snow was deep, heavy and cloggy ; after the first steps we no longer felt the warmth of the fires and were seized by the cold. Two candles flickered in the

tunnel. From time to time snowflakes driven in by a puff of wind engulfed them and settled to melt on our hands and faces. Ross and Clay opened their packs and their bags. They sorted out things and began to auction their possessions. After a moment Rich and Cincinnati did the same. We others looked on. Black was stretched out at the back against the wall, asleep with his mouth open and snoring.

"Did you notice?" asked Clay.

On Black's sleeves we could see the cut threads which had held his stripes. He too had rejoined us. He wouldn't bawl any more either.

"Take what you want," said Ross, pointing to the pile in front of him. Rich rummaged and took out a packet of dried figs.

"Oh, I want to keep those!"

"Oh yeah," said Cincinnati.

"I can't stand Yids haggling," said Ross.

"And do you think I can?" jeered Cincinnati.

The figs passed from hand to hand. They stuck to the teeth but made a sugary juice which was pleasant.

"Perhaps it isn't true," someone said. "Tomorrow we'll set off again and as soon as we arrive at the frontier the Reds will sue for peace."

No one answered.

"If only you could see them. If only they'd shoot. Red bastards! If only I could get hold of a single little one of them!"

One of the candles had completely melted and Clay warmed his hands over the other. Now it was quite dark. No sense of hours, no sense of time, only the beating of our blood which echoed in our heads. We were buried in our lair. Outside the sentries had disappeared in the snow. They waited and we waited too. The boundary between reality and dream had disappeared. Someone

slept against my back, Rich was against my belly ; I was stifled by the heat and an icy sweat ran over me.

* * *

“ Do you hear ? Listen. Listen, for God’s sake ! ”

A hand seized me by the throat and shook me, and then I felt someone rubbing snow on my face.

“ Look . . . ”

It was dark and the snow did not glisten.

“ Listen, it’s them ! ”

As I moved I made the branches we were lying on crack. How long had we been back in the hole with the machine gun ?

“ Have I been asleep ? ”

“ Shut up. Listen, they’re going to fire . . . ”

Rich’s breath grew shorter. Steel pieces clicked, barrels received the first bullet, then a luminous jet sprayed the deserted road and darkness reigned again. To right and left all our other weapons spat at the same time, opening and closing strange eyes of fire. There was a cry and then silence.

“ There was no one,” said Rich.

From a long way off in the direction of the river came the echo of other shots.

“ They’re attacking over there, you bet your life.”

But over there too the echoes died unanswered.

Little by little the night became a dirty thick yellow fog. It was day. Once more to our left, very far away, the heavy artillery began to thunder. It was an uninterrupted hammering which made the earth tremble. We could neither see the firing nor distinguish the noises : it was a far off cataract which pounded the earth from the sky.

“ Seen anything ? ”

Higgins and Black stood on the edge of our hole. We

shook our heads. Higgins' mouth was tight and you could no longer see his lips ; the corners of his mouth twitched.

"The Chinese attacked at Changjin last night," he said.

"The Chinese ?" echoed Rich.

"Yes," said the Sergeant, "the Chinese. Those are the guns of the Tenth Corps you can hear."

"That'll make them dance," said Rich.

"And what about us ?"

The two men shrugged their shoulders.

"No orders yet."

Black lifted the rag which protected the machine gun belt.

"Don't waste ammunition," he said. "I don't think we'll get any more for the moment." For the first time his voice was gentle.

"Come," said Higgins, "we've still got things to do."

Neither he nor Black did anything more. In his thick head Black must have had an inkling he had it coming to him. He had been cruel and sometimes detestable during training. Higgins never knew anything. No one had taught him how one emerges from childhood to maturity or that the death of two men can be separated by a hair's breadth. That's war. They visited the other posts and then came back on to the road. The snow came up to their knees. Twenty yards away from us we saw their backs and their elbows rise and fall each time they raised their feet. The road was straight and white and disappeared into the wood in the distance. There were four shots, no bullets whistled over our heads, no bullets ploughed into the snow. Their bodies made two green heaps on the road. We knew that they were dead. Automatically I fired the machine gun. The first burst grazed their bodies, knocking off Higgin's helmet. It was done and we could expect nothing more. When the belt was finished Rich stood up.

"Do we leave them ?" he asked.

From other holes heads and shoulders appeared.

"Clay," shouted Rich, "stir your stumps!"

"Get going, Clay," took up the men from hole to hole.

He ran up.

"We'll have to go," said Rich.

I saw his eyes.

"Leave them, they're dead," said Clay.

To the left of the lieutenant lay his helmet with a hole in it.

"They're dead. No, no," he said, trying to hold Rich's n.

Rich swung round and struck him in the mouth. In a second he caught hold of the barbed wire and was on the road.

"Bloody twat," said Clay. "Shoot him!" ^

I saw his hands go towards the trigger but those facing us killed him first. Rich doubled up, reeled back and fell between the two of us. His eyes were closed, his face limp. There were two holes, one above and the other below his ammunition belt. He opened his mouth, drew back his lips and shook his head. "No . . ." The word was stifled. "No . . ." His eyes still closed, he groped for something with his hands, clutched my bayonet and gripped it hard.

He said: "It's you . . . They were men . . ."

His head rolled. He was dead.

The wind had completely swept away the fog. All was silent, white and deserted. My limbs recovered their suppleness, I came out of my stupor. Could it be that I was no longer frightened? The half sleep into which I had fallen was only a revolt against waiting, a revolt against reality. Now I fretted for action. What I thought I had found on Saturday night, that kind of paean, no longer existed. I had flung it behind me and taken up my old life where I had left it. There was no solution. If I

climbed out on to the road what use would that be ? I needed no convincing.

Listen to the noise of the battle symphony ! There will be no more peaceful sleep for any of us. These noises, these roars, are men giving birth to their fates. You want to run away and find peaceful music. No. The war, your war, has rejected us, cast us into the realms of darkness ; we are millions roaring in the darkness. No one, not one of you, has had pity, not one of you made a gesture, said a provocative word. Funny isn't it, a man who struggles all alone ? The world can spit on him. Unleash yourselves ! Arm your little priests, your commissars, your policemen. Dig the earth to its depths, pile up the stones to the sky, hide your bodies, you who spew hatred. It is we who pay, and we shall always pay. Hoist your standards. Only dead men deserve your loves.

* * *

Clay pushed Rich's body against the parapet.

"What are we going to do ? " he asked.

From the other holes men called to each other.

"Well," said Clay, "are you going to make up your mind ? "

"Why me ? "

"You're like them, you've got money. You should know."

He saw me looking at Rich.

"Don't look at that silly c——, or else the same thing will happen to you ! "

We climbed out of our hole backwards, Clay dragging the machine gun. Each moment we expected the Communists to open fire. At last we were below the level of the road, near the river's edge. The other groups arrived one by one, carrying their weapons.

"What are we going to do ? "

I looked at their faces one after another. Rich was dead, it was all over with him. I had to pull myself together as quickly as possible.

"Where was the lieutenant hit?" asked one of the men.

"Right in his joy-box," said Clay.

"That's bloody funny," said another.

Away to our left the sound of artillery grew louder.

"The Reds attacked the Marines last night. They were Chinese," said one of the men.

"Chinese?"

"That's right," said Ross. "I was there when the lieutenant got it over the radio. Everyone's beating it."

"We might try to get Battalion Headquarters," suggested the Jew.

We were some twenty feet away from the tent. The stove had been knocked over in the snow. I stopped at the entrance. One by one the men followed me. The maps were arranged tidily on the table with pencils and a new block beside the radio. On the ground lay the lieutenant's belongings as if all ready for inspection.

"You're nuts," said Clay. "We're not asking anybody anything! We're pissing off!"

Ross opened a box of grenades which he dished out. We carried the machine gun into the tunnel at the double. There were two cans of gas left so we poured one over the radio set and batteries and the second over the tent. From the tunnel came the explosions of the grenades which they threw in to destroy the weapons. I don't know why, but I took from my pocket the canvas bag Rich had given me. I got out the matchbox, put it in my pocket and the moment the flames rose flung the bag in the fire. There was nothing left between Rich and myself.

One by one we crossed the river over the tree trunks. I was the last. We had to get away as quickly as possible. The tunnel had caved in, burying the steel-blue guns. No

regrets. We were pissing off. There were only Higgins' binoculars I should have liked — they were still on his chest. If the enemy fired now all fifteen of us would have had it. The leading man was not yet under cover on the far bank ; he still had a dozen steps to go before reaching the last pillar. I wanted to break into a run. I felt that my back was a free target for the Chinese. I must run. My feet wouldn't move. I was the last and should remain the last. Suddenly I wanted to turn back and see once more those blotches in the snow where the three of them lay. No. One by one I counted the men as they disappeared on the other side. Goodbye, I'm off. Clay was ahead of me and I followed automatically in his footsteps. A man in front of us missed a trunk and slipped into the water up to his thighs. He raised his arms and looked at us ; I could see the stream piling up foam and ice round his legs. His eyes grew larger and he began to cry like a child. There were only three of us now besides the man in the water, held up in the middle of the river. His teeth chattered and his upraised arms were motionless.

“Come on, you silly bastard, get out of there !”

The man's eyes looked at Clay's roaring lips. He made an effort, floundered, struggled and got out. He regained his balance like a clever dog on the tree trunk. Only three of us now nearing the other bank. Another few steps. Why were they so near to me now — those three lying already frozen in our rear while we, the living, sped from tree to tree ? That's life. The water, the woods, the broken bridge, those men and everything that was invisible . . . nothing was strange to me, nothing hostile, not even those men who had begun to chase us. They were all part of the world and if I wished I could love them like shooting stars in a summer sky. The man who fell in the water was already under cover, so I could look back. I wanted to see and carry away a memory of the

landscape: a river covered with snow where in places the water gushed, swirling its lumps of ice; a broken bridge, white, lying athwart its pillars . . . The road was too high and I couldn't see it, but there were wooded hills with great patches of snow and in the dead white sky the darker outlines of high mountain ranges.

We set off through the woods towards the road with lowered heads. In places the snow was deep and impeded us. We struggled up, succeeded in finding firm footholds and reached the top of the river gorge. The noise of the bombardment came to us in a murmur muffled by the trees. Once there was a burst, perhaps a hundred yards away from us. We started to run. It was three miles to the battalion positions. Although we had dumped everything except our weapons, food and blankets the going was too difficult and we began to get tired. It would take us two or three hours to rejoin the battalion. No one spoke and every moment we expected them to fire on us, for we all knew they had crossed the river behind us. I heard the man who had fallen in the water in front of me gasping every time he breathed. His boots and trousers were covered with ice. He sat down for a moment and tried to knock it off with his rifle butt, but seeing nobody else stop he hopped along after us.

It must have been between nine and ten o'clock in the morning. The frost was hoary and crisp. The temperature was between ten and fifteen degrees below. It wasn't snowing but the sky was ready to burst and there were pot-bellied striped clouds hanging in the branches. My feeling of cheerfulness disappeared. We had to reach our lines where there were trucks and tanks. I knew they were counting on me. That didn't worry me. But I was annoyed with them for having forced my hand, and annoyed with them in particular because I felt they were ready to give me enough courage to save the party. I didn't know

if I could be brave. At the moment we were fleeing, but once we arrived they would thrust me forward. They were right and I knew it. I had no right to say I wasn't an officer. It wasn't because I had bunked with them, picked at the same grub as them with my fingers, that I could refuse what I owed them. I had always known that I owed them something. I was one who had been equipped and every refusal on my part was only cowardice, even my refusal to become an officer. In three hours time they would be throwing me to the wolves. They were right, although it was difficult to stomach. But according to the rules of my clan and my country it was my interests they were defending rather than their own. I couldn't tell them I had relinquished everything and that I was as bare as they. And then it was never true, it was by choice and not an accident. You cannot abandon or renounce your heritage: you can destroy it but it remains in you. Whatever I did I could only be a fake bum, a fake down-and-out, a fake outcast.

In my newborn hope there was nothing of that. I was not afraid. All I wanted was not to let them down

* * *

"Joe, we'd better stop."

It was Clay who called out to me.

"I know."

"The man can't go on like that." He ought really to have stopped on the river bank. The water, which got into his boots, had frozen. Even if he had the strength to walk as far as the battalion his feet would have been lost by the evening. The man stopped, with Clay and myself at his side. After a minute the whole column came to a halt. Ross came running back from the front.

"You're nuts. They'll be up our arse at any minute."

"He's got to change," said Clay.

"So we've all got to cop it for that silly bastard," said one of the men.

"You can go on," I said, "and the others too."

"You bet we'll go on," said one of them.

"I'm staying," said Ross.

"So am I," said Cincinnati. "Anyhow I shall get a rest."

The others hesitated, then one of them said: "We'll wait for you a bit further on."

When they had disappeared the drenched man said:

"At least you'll be dry," said Clay.

"You shouldn't have done it. We'll all get caught."

"If we're caught," said Ross, "it was because you were a bloody twat!"

"Aw, shut your yap." The man began to weep. "It stings . . . it stings."

"Have you ever known ice to burn?"

I was relieved. I don't know why, perhaps because I had spoken.

"Don't stay on the road," I said. "We'd better get in the wood."

Like rabbits we scuttled down and reached the first trees. Cincinnati and Ross let themselves fall back on the snow. With his revolver Clay chipped away the ice on the leather, cut the laces and took off his boots. His stockings were covered with hoar frost, his feet were violet and the flesh wrinkled and pulpy. In the pure cold air I could smell tobacco burning.

"That's fine," said the man. "That's fine."

Clay had taken his feet and was massaging them with snow.

"Ah, that's fine," he repeated.

It was scarcely three minutes since we left the road. My breathing was normal again and—

The woods, the hills, the mountains, the sky all exploded in an earsplitting clatter. An automatic weapon had

opened up on the road. It was a heavy machine gun with a tack-tack different from ours. There was no end to its noise ; methodically it probed and probed. Then we heard their cries. They screamed louder than the firing, louder than iron and steel, screamed louder than the wind, than the spirits of the forest, louder than the winter fairy ! We could recognise their voices. There were two grenade bursts and they were silent. It began to snow.

It was not the man's soaked feet that saved us, nor the fact that we had stopped for him and taken to the woods, but the snow. In a few seconds it covered the tracks we had left behind. All five of us rolled on our bellies and burrowed ourselves in it. When all was quiet we heard guttural sounds and the noise of footsteps—they were probably Chinese who had crossed the river and taken up an ambush position during the night, who were now rejoining the others on our tails—then we heard bursts of laughter. Their laughter flew from tree to tree, from branch to branch, brushing the thick snow. It echoed soft and suave, childish and sinister, rolling over us like a death song. They began to croak : " Kroa . . . kroa . . . tch . . . tch . . ." We must have been quite near them. We heard them turn over the bodies and the soft thud the corpses made as they slumped back on the snow. Now and then a rifle butt banged against a helmet. We were entirely covered with snow. For another few seconds I heard them walking round the corpses of our men, and then I entered a world of silence where the only noise was the light piling up of the snowflakes one on top of the other. I think I regretted then not having been killed with the others on the road. We must have been encircled, cut off on all sides. Something moved next to me, I felt a weight against my cheek and then a gloved hand touched my mouth. I turned over on my back, coming out in the air. It was the idiot who had got wet and who, with bare

legs, was looking for his boots. His face was livid and it gaped in a rictus. He groped like a blind man, dragging himself along, his trousers and pants rolled up to the knees.

"Lie down, lie down!"

With one hand I plunged his head in the snow. As soon as I let go he raised it again and began to scream with mouth wide open. A long black form landed flat on us.

"Shut your yap, you dope!"

"Oh, my feet, my feet . . ." groaned the man.
"Mom . . ."

It was Clay who had fallen on us.

"Shut your yap, kid," he murmured, "shut your yap or I'll strangle you."

"My boots . . ." repeated the man.

We were certain that his cries had been heard. Then Clay seized him by the throat and squeezed it until he was silent. For a long time the two bodies remained motionless, one on top of the other. Clay made an effort not to let his lungs whistle: he breathed the air in little gasps and let the snow enter his mouth. Two or three times he said: "Shut your yap," then he began to move about. Inch by inch he swept away the snow from the length of my body and rolled the inert mass against me. After that he climbed on us, his head to our feet; the man was between the two of us, as he must have been between his mother's warm thighs. Gently but ever more strongly he massaged his legs.

"Come on, kid, come now . . ." he whispered.

Clay breathed against the icy flesh and the hairs, and once more the snow covered us, covered two living men giving their warmth and their breath to a dead man. What did it matter? We remained like that until nightfall. We had spent about ten hours motionless in the snow: we should never have found his boots. When the Chinese returned to the river it was dark, and he would have been dead anyhow. Clay did not kill him to save our lives, I

did not strike him because his cry would have given us away ; we did all that because from the moment when the river water had taken him prisoner he was dead. We knew it and so did he, and it was because we did what we could for him in spite of everything that we were men. What did it matter that he was dead and that we helped to kill him ? All of you, you help to kill every day. We left his chain round his neck with his name and address on it. Ross, who was never very bright, laid his rifle next to him, and on his hood put his helmet and fastened the chinstrap. We had no need of generals, of medals or speeches : he was nothing, not even a name, and he had been sent there to die. Now that the spring and summer have melted the snows and the grass has grown again he lies sleeping among the briars with his feet still naked. Perhaps he has been eaten by insects and his identity disc has fallen through his ribs into his chest, and as the breeze blows it makes it swing in its cage.

* * *

As we marched I took off a glove. In my pocket I opened my matchbox and wound my watch. We had no compass. To skirt the road through the wood was impossible, the snow was too deep and there were no landmarks in the dark. We were too weakened by the massacre we had just come through and by our halt in the snow to realize clearly what we were doing. We knew only one thing, that we were on the road once more marching southwards, marching, keeping warm, trying to eat, then marching, neither sleeping nor stopping.

Our fatigue and our stupor saved us that night. The Chinese had retired, leaving no one on the road. Why ? There seemed no reason for it. Perhaps ill-informed about their own progress and fearing that our tanks would return, they preferred to beat a retreat while waiting for daylight

to continue their chase. An hour later, sleepy and frozen, we should have fallen on them. Who knows ? Perhaps it would have been better that way. We were too stupefied to take the least precaution ; it was dark and we could see nothing, but along the road we knew that those little mounds were our men. The Chinese had laid them out by the roadside. We didn't even dream of avoiding the place where they were killed. We set out haphazardly. After a few yards, as nobody fired on us, Ross croaked like one of them and no one replied.

We marched and I covered my head, back and arms in my cape. At each step I felt my knees give way. Sometimes my feet stumbled against hard obstacles and a stabbing pain shot from my heels to my skull. The stubble of my beard irritated my skin and I could no longer make out the shape of my lips. I felt dirty, demoralized, my self-respect seeped away. It was the same with the other three. We had passed our limits. I did not know what day it was, who was dead or how it had happened. I no longer had a name. Everything that could have made us suffer had vanished. I was so empty and naked that nothing could frighten me any longer. When from time to time I regained my senses it was simply to be aware of my filth. The only things that interested me were my feet and my hands. Would they get frost-bitten ? How long was it since I had no more extremities ? Sometimes on purpose, spotting a stone, I kicked it with my foot. Only then did I feel that pain which rose from my heels to my eyes and I knew they were still there. Was that the secret of our wretchedness ? My spirit which formerly supported my body had sunk deep in me, lost in a last asylum of warmth. In some part of me a trace of intelligence still floated. We knew that alone we had no chance, we had to stick together, for each of us the other seemed a world warmer than oneself. Was there a maniac living who

would believe we were marching for him or for the Republic? And yet we were not marching for nothing. In spite of the state I was in you could have disembowelled my father or the whole country, and it would have made me laugh the way the Chinese laughed yesterday. That a nameless man with frozen feet was dead, that the whole squad was dead, was no problem - none of them were immortal. Fine! Let your sons fly away from your comfortable little nest, and see with what indifference we'll watch their heads tumble and their flesh bleed. We'll watch some puny Chinaman with a little grunt stick his bayonet in the softest part of his belly. No use yelling or wriggling your buttocks: it will be too late.

* * *

The battalion was in position at the far end of the woods. We arrived there at dawn. In greedy anticipation we savoured the taste of a hot drink. Every twenty paces one of us cried: "No. 3 Squad retiring!" so that the sentry should not poop off by mistake. "No. 3 Squad retiring!" and again after a few more steps the same cry, to which no one replied. At the exit to the wood there was hardly any snow and the ground was hard. It gave us a sense of liberation to be shot of the forest. At last in the sad grey light of dawn we saw the first outpost.

Ross whistled. "It's us!" he called.

". . . Us." The echo was long-drawn and the neighbouring hills sent back ". . . Us!" On the ground we saw the deep imprints of heavy trucks. As no one replied Ross fired a burst, which the echo amplified. We threw the capes back off our shoulders and trailed our weapons. Behind the wall of sandbags which protected the sentries we found a machine gun tripod, a washed out blouse and an empty pack beside a dark stain. Clay leaned over.

"It's blood," he said.

Ross leaned over in turn.

"You're wrong there, stretcher bearer, it's gasoline."

"No. 3 Squad retiring!" roared Cincinnati, cupping his hands to his mouth.

His voice echoed: ". . . retiring!" Then we began to run. A ghostly silence reigned in the camp, except for our heavy breathing and the patter of our boots.

They had gone. Cleaned up everything, carried away everything. Nothing left but empty crates, old boxes, a mess cauldron with dirty water and two trucks without motors or wheels.

"The lousy bastards," said Clay.

It was now daylight and we could see the whole camp empty and bare.

"The Chinese have been this way," said Ross, pointing to some tell-tale signs on the ground.

Further on near an open fire we found grains of rice beside tall sacks on which were printed Chinese characters. It was Tuesday morning. For the first time in my life I felt that time had become a sort of narrow band stretching out into uninterrupted night. Once out of the camp we let ourselves be borne along by the slope.

"We must eat," I said.

The dry salt biscuits and the meat together formed a paste which no saliva could dissolve. We had to stop. One of us knelt down, scraped the snow away from between the rocks and offered some to everyone. The road began to climb up a pass between two hills. From the top we saw a plain and away to the right a last range of hills which we had to cross. Once we were on the other side we should probably see our column. The going in open country increased our weakness.

Ross stopped, fumbled with his trousers, swore, took off his gloves and spread his legs. Through the folds of his snow-covered cape, then his jacket, his shirt and pullover,

he took out his penis. The cold entering his flies made him grind his teeth and took his breath away. I saw his hands turn blue, and his face was pasty and swollen. He tottered with weariness. He made a shell of his two hands to protect his genitals. After a moment the liquid began to flow, running over his hands. A smile spread over his lips as the warmth brought life to his fingers. I stood by his side, protecting him from the wind, and one after another, standing on the road like dogs, we helped each other to piss. We had reached a countryside where nothing had any more significance, where everything was unrelieved grey, yet with here and there a brilliant patch which was like an outburst of love. We were lost, isolated, cut off, like so many men their whole lives through.

It was much chillier on this slope. The wind, having unburdened its snow on the heights, had freshened and pierced through to our very skins like a gimlet, or it suddenly lifted up our coat flaps and made them beat violently against our legs. For a moment Ross caught hold of me and leaned with all his weight. He stood there swaying between sleeping and fainting.

"Come on," said Clay, "we must push on."

I felt Ross's cold glove against my neck where the hair finishes. He rubbed his hand gently as one strokes a horse. As his hand was numb he rubbed with his palm.

"Christ, what a c — — I feel !"

It was perhaps because of his gesture that I am still alive. And yet, for one second, by holding my fire, this same gesture nearly caused my death . . .

Hour after hour we lost the last traces of our dignity, all the red balloons of our illusions had long since burst in the air. We could not have been more naked ; the last thing we wanted to preserve and take with us was our humanity, something flamboyant which is only extinguished with the last breath of one's body. And we went

on because we were men, and because in some obscure way we were marching towards the future.

* * *

We trudged from gorge to gorge. Each time we thought we were going to come out onto the plain. I should have taken Higgin's map ! I knew that somewhere there was a river which flowed through the lowlands to the sea—I could not remember its name. If only we could reach it, we should be saved.

To our left rose a wall of rocks forty to sixty feet high and to our right a precipice. Above us we could see a few tongues of snow lying on the crest, but the road was dry and hard. Since early morning we had twice seen aircraft. We waved our arms but they were flying too fast and too high ; the second time they passed like crosses in the dappled sky— before we had gone a few yards they would be over the Manchurian frontier. For a few minutes we felt revived and everything seemed different. Now that we had lost all the facilities, all the reflexes of our civilization, death took on a different aspect : there was something complete in us, a blossoming which gradually filled up our emptiness. We no longer feared death, nor did we desire it so as to put a stop to our sufferings ; we were young and caught up in the struggle after having resisted it. But life and death are raised on a vaster plane. Democracy, Communism, hope, are meaningless words. One does not breathe for a party, the liver does not secrete its juices for democracies . . . such was our courage. It came from the sky, it was in the ploughed fields, in the eyes of beasts and it was our folly and our wealth. Always a few cold, sad greedy men will launch our common thirsts one against the other, and we will struggle, for our strength is so great that eternity for us is only the end of a day.

The road bent sharply. As we trudged on I could see the living combs of the rocks. The buzzing in my head grew easier. The road bent sharply and we ran straight into them. Twenty, thirty—I don't know how many there were. It was like a common graveyard, but exposed to the sky and wind. A dead man is terribly flat: there is nothing of him when lying on a road. Three Chinese slept with them. They had been piled up by the roadside, but one body had slipped down sideways, a tall guy with long legs. His head had been cut off. The Chinese must have returned at night, for none of the corpses had boots. Above them, in a hollow hidden by bushes in the mountain-side, the Chinese had installed a machine gun. When they opened fire our men must have called for their tanks, but first they had tried to destroy the machine gun with bazookas. It was then the Chinese must have killed them one by one as if slaughtering cattle. Two twisted shell cases pierced with bullets . . . the third bazooka firer must have been hit while he aimed. He had fallen to his knees, his tube over his shoulder, and the shell had burst in the rocks a yard away from him, riddling him as it burst. One of the tanks had turned and come to their aid and we could see the traces of its manoeuvre. It had fired on the yellow men with its guns and round the hollow you could see the shell holes. Three Chinese had been flung from their shelter by the explosion, a fourth remained, his bare legs sticking in the air. Most of the corpses had been turned over on their bellies. The bullets had battered them out of recognition and we could only agree about the tallest of them. We shouldn't have looked, we should have pushed on: we knew it was Burns. We stood there fascinated, trying to understand why the tank had run over him. We learnt why much later: he had returned with the tank, the last Chinese bullets had cut off his arm and he had fallen beneath the caterpillars.

A few hundred yards away at another bend one of our heavy tanks lay half off the road. Its right track had broken, causing the vehicle to skid with its front over the ditch. Ahead one could make out the spot where the Chinese had hidden to fire. There was a smell of burnt flesh round the tank; the first two who tried to get out could not have had time to leap before it caught fire and they burnt on the turret, stuck to the steel as on a gigantic frying pan. On the hillside pieces of bodies, heads and limbs of Chinese soldiers, killed by grenades, were encrusted in the rocks. A little further on we saw a man upright on the road.

"Hi," cried Clay, "what the hell are you doing there?"

"It's a negro," said the Jew.

The man looked like a lost pedestrian. He faced in our direction, three-quarters of him upright, his elbows to his body and his hands out from his chest. From afar he seemed to have oiled swept-back hair.

"Hi," cried Clay, pointing his rifle.

"Starko," said Ross. "A stark naked negro."

The man had slim hips and small buttocks. We could not see his feet, for he was buried up to the knees—that was what kept him upright in the middle of the road. He had stepped on a tank mine. His weight had not been enough to set off the detonator properly and the thing had gone wrong. The charge, not having enough compression, had opened a hole in the road into which he had sunk, then the powder had flared up, carbonizing him and stripping him of clothes at the same time. The flames had burnt what he wore on his head as well as his hair. His fingers had melted down to the second joint.

"He's all ready to eat," said Ross.

"Perhaps it's a Chink," said Clay.

We walked round him but there was no way of determining his race. Clay tapped him on the shoulder with

his rifle. He held fast, well anchored in the ground. In turn Ross raised his weapon, and the point probed in what must have been his mouth. There was a slight shock and suddenly the barrel penetrated his head, breaking the black crackled skin.

"It's an American," said Ross, 'we can't leave him naked."

"What the hell, you want to bury him?" asked Cincinnati.

Ross shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm going to send him on his way." He took a hand grenade out of his pocket.

"You're crazy," said Clay, "with all the Chinese there must be around!"

"Stand back, stand back I tell you!"

Ross tore out the pin to show us he meant business.

We backed away to the other side of this kind of human roast.

"What are you going to do?" I asked him

"Stand back," he said more quietly.

"You're a bloody idiot. You'll get your grenade in the arse, and the old 'un there doesn't want it," said Clay, pointing to the black carcass.

"You don't understand. You can't leave an American like that for them to spit on. You want me to . . ."

We saw Ross raise his arm towards us.

"Okay, okay," said Clay, "don't leave him naked. You're right, you sucker, do your stuff."

Ross's eyes went red.

"You lousy bastard. You bastard stretcher-bearer!"

Clay took a step backwards.

"You've got the shits, I tell you."

"You're not going to start fighting," said Cincinnati, "for that thing there, are you?"

He gave a violent blow with the butt of his rifle on the corpse, which echoed like dry wood but remained upright.

"As for you, you dirty Yid . . ." Ross choked.

For one second I thought he was going to chuck the grenade at our feet.

"Filthy Yid, wait till I've finished ! "

"Come, Ross," I said, "come."

With a jerk of the shoulder he adjusted the tommy-gun on his back, his arms fell to his sides and he began to weep silently.

"It's Buck," he said, "It's my brother."

"You're really set on it ? " I asked him.

"Yes. So that nothing remains. Not a trace, do you understand ? "

With his free hand he caught hold of Cincinnati's cape.

"My *brother*, do you understand ? "

Cincinnati broke out in Hebrew, with his head flung back: "God who sees my path on earth, all powerful Israel . . ." He stopped for a second "It's the prayer for the dead."

"I'm not a Jew," said Ross.

Cincinnati raised his arms to heaven.

"Who is a Jew in this world and who isn't ? Where is the oppressor and where the oppressed ? "

All four of us were standing in front of the corpse. When he had finished his prayer he asked again: "Are you sure it's your brother ? "

"Yes," said Ross. "I recognised his gold teeth."

"Well, you're doing the right thing."

Gently he unclenched the fingers which gripped the grenade and took it from Ross's hand. "Scram," he said. "Scram ! "

The four of us could have run and then thrown the bomb, but Cincinnati understood that Ross wanted something else. We took the twenty paces to the ditch. Clay flung Ross into it. I raised my head. The Jew was still standing in front of the body with closed eyes. He

stretched out his arm and placed the grenade in the black mutilated hand. He lost another second trying to close the fingers, then he made his way to the precipice, counting out loud. At six I put my head down, another three seconds and there was a terrific explosion. From the hill-side stones and lumps of rock fell down on us. When we got up Cincinnati was waiting on the road. The corpse had disappeared.

"We can get going," said Clay, "the Chinese are bound to turn up after those fireworks."

* * *

At midday we saw planes again. One of them came near us and we could make out the white star under its wing. We jumped for joy and waved our helmets. It wasn't a jet. The pilot made us understand by dipping the wings that he had seen us, after which it disappeared behind the hills where the tank had burnt out. A few seconds passed and a squadron of planes was overhead again. They drew near the crest in a great circle and disappeared in the same direction as the one which had flown over us. From all sides the mountains echoed their fire as they probed the narrow gorges in which the evening shadows had begun to fall. After the spatter of machine guns we heard the tearing noise of rocket fire. When they passed the point where the sun had been they became black lines in the grey sky. Brushing the crests once more with their wings, they dived down on the same spot.

"They must have spotted the Chinese," said Clay.

Suddenly the road above us and the whole sky took on a blinding white piercing gleam, changing to orange, and there from the path we had just left rose waves of flame which suddenly went out, causing a blast which clapped like thunder. One of the planes had just dropped its load of napalm bombs. When the light and the noise

died down and the sound of their engines died away to the north three tall columns of smoke rose into the sky between the white lines of the hills. Little by little the same silence and solitude fell on us as before; the wind twisted the smoke and dispersed it in the sky. After two hours marching we saw the plain ahead, then it was hidden by piles of rocks. From afar it looked like a gigantic pan bordered on three-sides by mountains.

Once more we saw the plain. There in the distance was the pass which led to the river. In the immense plain cut by the black of the forests and the chequered grey of the terraced fields we could see nothing moving. Our men were probably in the woods, or perhaps had crossed the path and were on the other side of the river. The wind had blown the snow from the road, but everywhere else it formed a shallow powdery covering which the least puff of wind bore up in spirals. The air was dry and cold. Between the rocks sprouted stunted bushes which whistled in the wind. Sometimes across the scree we tried to rejoin the road lower down, and then the branches whipped us as we passed, slapping our helmets, trying to find our faces. Full winter over the land. We marched with heads down and bent backs. No trace of life, no trace of men. We had just left the road for good and tried to descend direct down the spurs into the plain. Our eyes were hurt by the reflection of the snow on the crests, although here the light had begun to fade. Day had already become a memory lost and cast behind us.

It was Tue day, of a month and year unknown. We were almost out of the mountains. Huddled together we examined the darkness, icy as the heaven and bottomless as the night.

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As soon as night fell we stopped in a forest of dwarf

trees. There was very little snow. Between the trees was a maze of sturdy bushes. We had to clutch on to the one in front of us in order to climb. In places we felt a soft dry moss on which we should have liked to flop, but we had to plunge in deeper to get away from the road. The tops of the trees and even the low branches were invisible in the heavy clouded sky. In spite of all our efforts we made an appalling noise. Cincinnati was in front. Several times he stumbled against a tree trunk, and blindly we fell all three against him, banging our weapons together and getting tangled up. Ross had not opened his mouth since his brother's burial. Once he stopped, sat down and began to weep again. Cincinnati picked him up and we started off. We came across another patch of moss.

Clay gave a soft whistle.

"Stop," he said.

"What?" asked the Jew in front.

"We must change our socks," Clay hissed.

"Here in the dark? Just like that?"

"You shut your mug. Haven't you finished crying?"

"Oh, let him be," murmured the Jew.

"Ross! say, Ross . . ."

"What?" he said at last.

"Take off your boots!"

"I can't . . ."

He lay down and did not move

"We'd better make a fire," said Cincinnati.

"Where do you think you are?"

Clay and I untied our shoes. Cincinnati unlaced Ross's. I felt my feet. I could feel my calves but lower down nothing. I had taken off my mittens and kept on my woollen gloves. Crazy with anxiety I tore them off and tried to scratch to bring life into my feet. The snow had soaked through my shoe-leather and my socks were covered with ice.

"Cut the cackle," hissed Clay. "Well, so what, they're frozen."

At that moment Ross began to moan: "Ah, ah . . ."

The forest around took up his plaint. I heard Clay or the Jew give him a slap. His cry died and he began to sob.

"My brother . . . my poor kid brother . . ."

"Shut your mug," said Cincinnati.

"Keep your's shut, you dirty nigger."

The Jew began to laugh.

"No," he said, "not that !"

"You've said it," said Clay. "Get busy. Rub, rub . . ."

I had taken my feet in my hands and I was rubbing. My hands became boiling hot and somewhere something began to sting. I couldn't control myself and I began to cry too. Drop by drop a little blood trickled into my frozen soles. At ground level two green points lit up, like two moving eyes which stared at us. Bushes crackled, the eyes disappeared.

"There," said Clay, "over there !"

Someone was climbing behind us. A body dragged itself along ; crushing the bushes in its path. There was a hail of bullets and the noise of a rolling body. A voice cried : "Dirty yellow dog ! " Then silence.

We held our breaths. It must have been a Chinese patrol which had fallen on one of our wounded. The noise he had made dragging himself along had drowned our own clatter. It was our turn to be seated and unable to get up, all four of us, bare-footed our boots and socks spread around us. Despite the darkness we were paralyzed in our ridiculous position. The two green points reappeared. None of us stirred. Somewhere the bushes began to rustle again. The eyes disappeared and we saw five shapes pass silently ten paces from us, hardly visible between the dark tree trunks and the night beyond. The forms moved easily, they seemed to fly over the ground.

It was them, the hunters. Little by little their steps faded away and disappeared. Had we been there a few minutes or hours ? No one could have said. The little heat which we had rekindled in ourselves before the patrol passed had flown, now it was our hands' turn to be frozen. We were four men and our limbs were dead. In a few minutes it would be our noses, our ears and then our chests. The cold is like sleep. If you stretch out or lie down the cold covers you, encloses you and bears you away.

"Come on, come on," said Clay. "rub !"

He spoke aloud. We had nothing more to lose.

"Rub . . ."

And we rubbed our feet with stiffened forearms, we breathed hard, waved our arms. Clay broke open a bottle of alcohol, managed to stick a match between his teeth, lit it and with his face down to the moss set the alcohol ablaze ; it burned noiselessly. We plunged our hands and feet in it and our blood began to flow once more. Shortly afterwards, when we were redressed, it started to snow again ; in a few seconds we were buried, and then suddenly we saw the limpid sky shimmering with cold and riddled with stars. We were in the middle of a clearing into which several paths ran. It was light and each tree stood out against the milky sky. Down below, at treetop height, we saw the whole plain lit up by the wintry sky. With our dry socks and boots on a part of our strength returned. In the direction we were going the Chinese would fall on our tracks again now that it had snowed. I managed to get out my matchbox and open it. It was half-past ten. There was a whole night to live through.

"What now ?" asked Clay.

"We must have a fire tonight and get some sleep," I said.

"Then we must expect the patrol back," said Ross.

We walked to the edge of the forest more or less in the

direction they had disappeared. The over-bright sky had caused the temperature to fall again. We were upright, hidden behind the trees. Each time a sleeve, a glove or a knee touched one of the trunks, we felt how the cold welded the stuff to the bark. Gradually our warmth began to vanish once more. How long could we wait like this and still be in a condition to fight? Somewhere five men on patrol were looking for the 12th American Army in retreat. My body shrank. I breathed into my shirt and my feet went dead, but I knew I would live long enough to have the consolation of their deaths. My feet were glued to the ground and with my left hip pressed against the tree so as not to fall.

I had a fine steel helmet on my head. I took off my right mitten and kept moving my trigger finger, for I had to live until the Chinese returned. There were only five enemies, five men in the whole world who wanted to prevent me living until dawn. Now that they had driven me into a corner I would kill them with delight. I had never known a feeling more powerful, simpler or purer. I felt no resentment towards them. Had the sun been in the sky and had they been able to understand my words and feelings, I should have waited for them in the middle of the path. I loved them, and it was funny to begin to love those whom I was going to kill. They were dearer to me than the coyotes of my country. We did not understand each other, but that was not because of my unwillingness. We were all at the end of our journey, so let those who seek adventure die under the great starry sky! In front and behind us the tree trunks split with the cold. With my last remaining strength I checked my loader, felt the spring—it was firm and the magazine was full. They were the first men I was going to kill in my life. One of us gave a whistle, I felt a light breeze pass on my face; I was no longer cold; a clawed hand had taken hold of

my heart. They were there on the path and they were marching. I saw their helmets with earflaps, their long piqué capes and their skin boots. They were small yellow children. Leaning forward, they balanced their weapons at arm's length. I was the nearest to them. Another few steps and they would have passed me and I could have shot them in the back. But something unglued me from my tree, the material of my cape tore, making a hideous noise, the hand let go my heart and took me by the throat. I was in front of them and they saw me. Neither Clay, Cincinnati nor Ross could fire: my body protected the five yellow men. We were motionless at the gates of our paradises. In front of me the first one raised his weapon. He was going to fire without aiming. It was then that I felt again Ross's caress on my neck; it was him I was going to save, Ross, Clay and . . . But these were men too. It was too late, I had already fired. All the tension within me was released. My gun was burning hot before the magazine was empty. They twisted, splashed the snow, and I fired until they were motionless.

We ran among the trees over the yielding snow, then we stopped to listen. Not a sound. The forest was asleep. Our running warmed us but the fight had burnt up our last reserves of nervous energy. We had to find a place of refuge before we collapsed. Once more we set out. The Chinese dead were already far behind. The trees had given place to dwarf oaks; the soil was tortured, dotted with rocks with pointed teeth. We had remounted the path taken by the patrol. A little higher up we stumbled on a body, an American. Clay turned him over to see his face; he might have been twenty and his hair and beard were white. With his blanket he had made himself boots which were now in ribbons, and his turned-up sleeves showed his bare elbows. A bullet had got him in the leg and he had climbed on his own towards the south, using

his elbows. They had no trouble in killing him. A Chink had put a heel on his throat just long enough for him to blanch and suffer before meeting his Creator. We turned him over on his belly and left. On all sides, on the flanks of the mountains and in the woods, there must have been our wounded which these silent patrols exterminated. We marched on for a bit, collecting wood—Ross found a large branch—and in the shelter of a rock we lit a fire. After a great effort the bark caught and the wood began to burn.

The Chinese were now of no importance. Our fire smoked, spat out flames, crackled and spluttered. It was partly sheltered from the north by the rock, which seemed good enough to us. For the first time since Sunday we felt the warmth and our weariness became immense. We had passed the threshold of indifference. The branch had caught well, it grew red and the flames caressed us. Our shoe-leather thawed and I could feel my feet. Cincinnati had fallen asleep. In his hand he held a piece of chocolate which he had not the strength to lift to his mouth. I struggled not to let my eyelids fall like a curtain over my eyes, and the effort was so out of proportion that it made me tremble. I was going to faint, and yet I wanted to keep awake while they slept. I wanted that. Could I have got a taste for war? There was an animal joy in me to be alive and to have survived. Clay was squatting with his head between his legs. He was going to fall in the fire, I had to wake him. But I could not. Something weighed against me through the mists and I heard the sound of breathing; it must have been Ross. The warmth was so sweet and sleep was without care, without soldiers, without war. I struggled. The fire reddened weakly through my eyelids. What was the dead man's name? There were so many of them. I myself was dead. My muscles distended and, crossing the infinite empty spaces, I rose again towards creation

The wind changed, bringing new snows which would fall on the earth. We slept on the icy soil of Korea, lifeless, abandoned to chance and to the hazards of war. Kill us, kill us now . . . take away our warmth . . . tomorrow in turn we are going to kill in order to live.

* * *

“Get up, get up, you sons of bitches !”

Someone coughed, cleared his throat and spat. I did not open my eyes and the effort I made to come to the surface released a nagging pain in my neck. I had the impression of climbing up from the bowels of the earth. A bubble obstructed my throat, rose, fell, rose again, blocking my ears. The earth shook and swayed with the roll of an eternal storm. Daylight trickled through my eyelids. I had an irresistible desire to cheat and to be a coward, to cry for help, to weep, to say that I was ill. But for whom could I put on this act ? Each of us was faced with the others and I could not refuse to live. I dared not open my eyes. A very feeble warmth brushed my face, at times a veil clouded it, then the cold bit my skin again and again I felt a little warmth. The noises of the earth abated and the storm passed in the sky. Somewhere there was a battle going on. Then I remembered where we were and I opened my eyes.

It must have been Clay who spoke and swore at us, but weariness made him fall back on to the dead fire. Ross and Cincinnati were rolled up in a ball like dogs. I should never have the strength to get up. But I must, we had already overplayed our luck. In the west the sky was blue ; a low pale sun flung out its heat, obscured from time to time by narrow bands of mist which cast black patches on the ground. It was a grim colour, not a holiday-maker's sky, but it seemed limpid to my tired eyes. Courage and heroism, that was what I was trying to draw

from my body by making it get up. Every organ revolted. A bitter bile rose to my mouth. In the plain our guns were in action. I could hear them fire, and immediately afterwards the explosions ; then, after the guns, the silky whining fire of rockets. Once more the noise . . . Perhaps I was dreaming. If I opened my mouth and let myself spew we should all be done. I was out of breath. My heart was going to burst—already everything was in a haze ; if only I did not vomit I should be able to get up. If I managed to make one effort I could make another. Don't leave me . . . I'm too desperate and too lonely to die . . . If I were a man I ought to tame and master my body's terror. My mouth emptied. It tasted atrocious, but the spasms ceased, I was on my feet and I looked at the world.

At the four cardinal points, in the sky, on the land, in the earth, it was war.

Get up, you bunch of twats !

I kicked savagely with my boots. My words had no meaning, either for them or for myself. I had to hurt them, hurt them more than they could hurt themselves, then their consciousness would return. I walked on them, stamped on their hands, kicked them in the belly. They cried, groaned and came out of their sleep.

"Christ, they're making it hot," said Clay.

On our knees we began to listen for the sounds of battle.

"Shit," said Ross, "Couldn't you let us sleep ? "

"Look where we are," I said.

"So what ! If the Chinks are fighting some place else, they'll let us alone."

Clay stood up, only to sit down again in a hurry.

"That's right," he said. "We couldn't have chosen a better spot."

We were visible from all sides at once, well in view

near the highest rock you could find. Contrary to what we had thought the night before, we were five or six hundred feet up, on the last crest of the ridge. A few hundred yards away to our right the forest began again.

"We'd better get under the trees," said Clay.

Ross picked up the charred faggots left over from the fire.

"Got any more alcohol?"

"No," said Clay.

He took a cartridge, unscrewed it with his teeth, spread the powder under the wood and set light to it.

"We're going to have breakfast," he said. "If we've got to get through that at least we'll have our bellies full!"

The branches caught fire between our knees, making a slender column of smoke rise which Cincinnati tried to disperse with his helmet. At that moment the artillery fire increased. In that avalanche of noise we realized how unimportant our smoke was.

The weather was fine. We saw nothing of the battle. It was good to be there in the morning, free to do what we wanted, to search for our enemy, to deny him until we felt inclined. Once we were wide awake we felt the benefit of our sleep. Another few movements of our stiffened joints and we should be ready to carry on with our journey. Life had awakened with new savours and new desires. We were proud to be sitting there calmly lighting a fire behind the Chinese lines.

"What about your feet?" asked Clay.

That was the fly in the ointment. Our feet had sweated by the fire and the night frost must have iced them again, but we thought it would pass off once we started walking. We had thrown our cans of food on the fire and they swelled as they warmed.

"If it wasn't for the army," said Clay, "war wouldn't be so bad."

I looked at them and got the impression that I was

standing in front of our squad and seeing myself as well. We looked shocking, but there was something more shocking than our faces—our gestures. Our hands were welded in the shape of a spoon, the movements were rounded and brisk like those of little old rheumatically men, and our eyes were sad. Come and see how glorious war is ! This is the moment for you to look at us. Can't you see in us all those sacred flames ? You expected something else—beautiful colours. You didn't think that we shouldn't care a f—— for you. You see us there with tousled hair, running with flags clasped to our breasts, and you think that each time we stop, after brushing our teeth and saying our prayers, in our ecstasy we take out your little snapshot. Well, it's not like that. It's the men behind the lines who do that, who have time for erotic dreams of a morning gloating over your picture before marching forth to kill the wicked enemy, the monster, and then roll over to sleep again. For us you don't exist. We live the adventure and we go down into hell—but alone.

You should have seen Clay with his little triangular face and long sparse hair. The flesh and the fat had left his cheeks and the bones jutted out. A small forehead on which sweat, filth and cold had plastered his scant hair. The nose stuck out of his face as if independent of it. From the nostrils two wrinkles ran down to the corners of his mouth, which he couldn't close any more because of his split lip. It bared his great round teeth. The sagging flesh of his face was furrowed, and in his eyes was nothing but suffering—an appeal, but not to us. Everything he could find in the way of clothes he had put on. His stretcher-bearer packs were like two hernias. He was squatting on his heels and he grubbed about in the fire, trying to pull out his can.

Ross had a thick face. A nose with dilated nostrils.

His mouth was full and well shaped, but it drooped, his face covered with spots up to the flesh about his eyes. He clenched his teeth, showing his square chin. He had several mufflers round his neck and a couple of hoods over his helmet, and in his snow-cape he looked like a barrel. The leather of his rifle-sling cut a deep fold in his shoulder. In his mittened hands he grasped his open mess tin in which the hash was boiling. His eyes were frank, wide-open and hard, eyes which tried to seek beyond the mysteries. His mouth was half open. He leaned over, sniffed at his mess tin, breathed hard and started to guzzle with his eyes on the fire.

Practically nothing could be seen of Cincinnati. A black very bushy beard, the tip of his nose and his moustache, wrinkles . . . His eyes were hidden by the peak of his cap, over which he had put his hood and over the hood the steel helmet with its plastic lining. He had tied string round his waist to keep in place two or three extra pullovers, and round each button were more strings on which he hung everything he had to use. He scraped in his mess tin, his lower lip protruding, chewed and then scraped again. Sometimes you caught a glimpse of his black pupils and the whites of his eyes. He had found a pair of rotten leather gloves and had made two holes in them with strings to tie round his neck.

There were only a few embers and hot ashes, over which we piled our arms. The sun had climbed a few degrees in the sky, the fog had entirely evaporated and the snow glistened, hurting the eyes. As we ate we tried to ignore the noise of battle so as to hear anything that might crop up round us. We could not have been closer or more identical than we were. Cincinnati threw a handful of snow on the ashes and we left.

Clay led the way. Slowly he advanced towards the edge of the wood. The noise of the battle became more

metallic. We abandoned ourselves to the rhythm of the firing. Slowly we entered a world we had not yet known. We began to run, for the snow was not very thick. We reached the first curtain of trees, then the second, an open zone, and then more trees. Now the noise seemed to come from an enormous cavern and fell on us like a lusty douche. Our teeth chattered, each salvo puffed out our cheeks, our limbs trembled, bruised by the waves of sound. We reached the last trees and could survey the plain.

The air was crystal clear and seemed to put the whole battle within our reach. Two armies were there below. There was the war, the great war we were looking for ! It spread out in minute details, as perfect as an organic construction. It had been stage-lit for us and was more powerful than the sun. We fell to our knees and then on our bellies in the snow. It was beautiful, it was majestic. I flowed, I let myself go, I watched, hypnotised. The plain which yesterday seemed dreary, melancholy and empty, had suddenly woken up and was completely alive. There was very little snow, just enough to heighten the colours of those who were moving about on it. From where we were we could see each position, each shell-hole, each man. The encircling hills had slightly more snow on them, which softened the outlines of their trees. To our left, that is to say to the east, the mountains fell sheer into the plain. The Chinese and our men were flanked by this granite wall. To the right the mountains descended in terraced slopes covered with thick forests. We ourselves were behind the Chinese facing the pass through which part of our army had retreated the day before, and the road we had left during the night came out into the plain through the woods to our right. Only by that route could the heavy weapons, tanks and guns of the Chinese be brought down the mountainside. It became the other flank of the two armies. The Chinese were trying to force the

pass, to cut the two bridges over the river and thus capture all our dispersed and fleeing troops in the north west. While we slept they had brought their troops by the road to the edge of the plain ; there were several thousand of them in front of us and I imagined that the woods to the right must be full of them. For the moment our vantage point could not interest them, for it was well in the rear of the battlefield. The plateau was about twelve miles long and six wide, and the American lines were established a little beyond an ideal line cutting it into two equal parts, with the Chinese a mile or two from the inner border above which we were lying. When our guns fired it was practically with open sights and an elevation of two or three miles. From the woods on the right to the wall on the left we had a continuous line of mobile six inch guns, with heavy reinforcement tanks on both flanks and in the centre. Behind this line, in clumps, were batteries of rocket guns mounted on trucks. In front of the guns and behind the rocket throwers we could see narrow trenches filled with men. In front, in the old positions, the soil was ploughed up and black motionless bodies lay in the snow.

The plateau was uneven. Seven or eight waves of rising ground ran across its width. From our height we could hardly see the contours but I supposed they must be very accentuated, forming little valleys dotted with trees and vegetation. A ribbon of trenches and pockets meandered from crest to crest, representing the Chinese lines. We saw shapes the size of dolls stripped to the waist digging the ground with picks and spades and cutting down trees, and other dolls in long files dragged pieces of light artillery and tiny machine guns mounted on bicycle wheels. Three tanks were manoeuvring in the undergrowth, dragging heavy shapes which we could not recognize. Several roads and paths criss-crossed over the plateau. At their junctions we could make out little Korean houses of wood or plaster,

forming tiny villages surrounded by a mosaic of fields. On the Chinese side three villages were burning with twisted orange flames and smudging the clear sky with their smoke.

On the right flank near the woods our guns and tanks were in close order, while in the centre, and the farther the eye travelled towards the cliff, the line was made up of little groups which seemed isolated. For the men who were fighting there could be no feeling of unity or real comprehension of the battle in which they were engaged.

In the pass which led away to the river in the far distance we saw three thin columns. Pin-pointing them, we thought we could recognize the stocky shapes of pioneers and their great caterpillar-wheeled bulldozers with pincers and claws, but after a while the far off image blurred and we could not tell whether the columns were climbing towards our lines or leaving the battlefield.

Eight, ten seconds passed without a flame spurting from our lines. . . . I took my hands from my ears and my heart beat loudly ; I was drenched with sweat. A lull fell over the plain, clinging to the echo of the last salvo.

I heard Ross get up.

"What's happened to our guys ? " he said. "They shouldn't have . . ."

Below we heard the Chinese sawing down trees and the crash they made as they fell. The black smoke which hung over our lines began to disperse. Then for the first time we realized that throughout the bombardment the Chinese had not stopped their activities. Of course they could not see the long barrels with their black mouths, could not see the tanks anchored to the ground. They could see nothing. They heard the detonations and then the shells were on top of them, killing them or sparing them. I tried to count our guns, starting from the right, but suddenly our whole line began to move. They were

retreating. We saw the guns swaying on their cradles at each dip in the ground, while the tiny figures busied themselves about them.

"No . . . the silly bastards ! " Ross roared.

A sensation of uneasiness took hold of us, as if someone very dear were betraying us. Once more, as on the first day of the campaign, I had the impression of criminal butchery. Away to our left the guns began to fire ; the crackle of light weapons accompanied the noise of their salvoes. Between our retreating right wing and the stationary left something black was advancing among the stunted trees, perhaps four miles away. I could not believe it was the Chinese. They were no bigger than dolls and yet I could make out the meaning of their movements : they were running, they had penetrated the breach, and were trying to get behind our left wing. Our right wing was silent but it had stopped retreating : the Chinese had got within range of their machine guns. One after another we saw our tanks deploy to increase their field of fire ; on the extreme right other tanks got under way ; they had not yet spotted the Chinese for there was a crest in front of them, but to us they seemed like huge beasts equipped with antennae which a smell and an extraordinary sensibility would attract towards their prey. There, they had come out ! Their snouts rose in the air, exposing their white stars and guns which oscillated and pointed like snapping jaws at what they were about to devour. They put on speed and at moments disappeared among the trees, only to reappear as green blotches on the white snow. In places their steel bellies or their tracks would uproot a tree and carry it along with all its branches before dropping it. If only we could cry out, wave our arms, warn those madmen who were going to be reduced to pulp by these voracious beasts.

But no . . . Suddenly a tank blew up. In tragic slow

motion, exaggerated by the distance, it rose from the ground, turned, and there was its pale belly with its two gaping sockets. While still in the air a red star appeared giving off smoke, and it burst into flame. The others made a detour round the flaming carcass, reached the last crest and suddenly, as if on parade, all the guns on the right were trained on the same objective—they pointed in our direction, towards the woods, where the road came down the mountains. The whole line burst into flame and each jaw vomited continuous fire. The noise was even more furious than a short while before. There were now two battles going on. On the left the tanks were damming the Chinese flood, to the right our heavy batteries and the rest of our armoured cars pounded the woods, which served as a point of departure for the Reds. A village near the path blazed up like a torch.

Since one of our tanks had been destroyed our sentiments changed. What followed was very confused. Without stopping the Chinese swarmed over our trenches, trying to outflank our tanks and crowd them to the mountains. They had succeeded until then, but they could hardly foresee the rescue tanks arriving in their rear. On the left our guns ceased firing; two of the attacked tanks were ablaze and another with a broken track spun round and round in circles, firing. Behind the first Chinese flood came a second. It advanced four or five hundred yards behind the first wave but at a slower speed. One could see men kneeling, flinging themselves on the ground, running forward again, then it all became too hellish, ridiculous and mad. It was hell without hope.

To the right, methodically, our shells began to cut up the ground yard after yard. They fired until every tree crashed or splintered, until everything flat took on a relief, and every hollow was filled up.



Sweet war, tender carnage !

We sweated in the snow. We were as crazy as them. Roars tore from our throats. There were the heavens falling about our ears . . . and yet, compared with the seasons, the winds and the clouds, and despite the desire we all felt to go to the extreme, it was merely a ridiculous and senile agitation no greater than man's own stature, never surpassing him and leaving him the only victim. Above us the mountain crests were tinged with shadow, the plain still bore its same severe aspect with the roads crossing it. Nothing had been changed and nothing would change in the structure of the world. Whatever the noises our follies awaken, silence will fall again on all our battles.

A group of mobile guns had just put a box barrage round a zone which served as a refuge for the Chinese. How could they suspect the effect of their fire ? All the other guns followed suit. They aimed and it was like an enormous vacuum cleaner gathering up those fragile bodies one by one. At each salvo whole trees were uprooted ; one second they shook off their snow, then they burst with a whistle. Sometimes you saw bundles of men rolling over and over, rising with the trunks, sometimes the trees as they fell buried the kneeling groups. At this point the snow disappeared and fresh soil covered it over. Often the same body was killed several times. The wind of war bore it away like a puppet, hurled it aside and displaced it. But among the dead there were always the living who got up and ran. You saw them dart out in swarms like insects, trying to cross the barrages to calmer spots, then a new salvo made them alter their course, dispersed them and they began again.

A part of our infantry was making a bid for the old trenches, but the second Chinese wave had taken advantage of the carnage to occupy them. Our men were upright in open order: they swayed, some fell in, others outside,

and the remainder retreated ; another few steps and they fell beneath their own machine guns. Then again, the mincemeat that had been made in the woods seemed justified. We made signs as if they could see us. Some of our men escaped and we saw them clamber up behind our tanks. Two more were on fire, for the Chinese were using anti-tank rifles. At fifty yards the bullets could pierce the armour plating ; once inside, if they had not spent themselves, they rebounded from one side to the other, maiming and killing.

The first wave had been annihilated. Not a single man remained alive. One of the flaming tanks limped towards the trenches. Here too the powdered earth had absorbed the snow and only the trenches still wore a thin white necklace. Away to the right it seemed as though a disease had begun to peel the woods. Behind our lines little trucks arrived from all sides. They were the supply wagons, and among them were Red Cross ambulances. Several times, behind a battery in action, we saw these trucks unloading their shells.

The flaming tank had engaged one of its caterpillars in the trench. Tilted at a crazy angle it advanced, enfilading the dark line. It did its work slowly. In front of it gesticulating forms leapt out, which became a target for another tank just coming up. At last the damaged tank stopped, three men jumped clear and it exploded. In the rear the tanks had regrouped, escorting those which were damaged. The breach was closed ; it was the same front as a few hours before. A few isolated shots and our whole line fell silent.

In the woods new Chinese working parties had resumed their activity. Their three tanks reappeared, dragging heavy guns. There seemed to be more Chinese than ever. Behind our lines, quite far away, we saw more trucks appear. They stopped in a fold in the terrain, men got

out and made their way on foot to the trenches. As soon as they reached them they too became busy as ants, dragging away the corpses. I was convinced that we were dreaming: none of it was possible. Six Chinese guns were already in position, the cries of their gunners came to our ears.

"What's the time?" asked Clay.

"Eleven o'clock."

"Suppose we grab some chow."

"What makes them fight like that?" asked Ross.

Our deafness made us shout. I saw Ross's huge mouth open to speak.

"Because it's war," roared Clay.

* * *

Midday. We had climbed to another copse where we could see better. Ross cut some branches and we were able to sit dry. The battle of the morning was still in our heads and we were bewildered. We were too high up, too far away to suffer, but down there each man saw only his death, his foxhole and the muzzle of his gun, all of which were in proportion to his stature. We had seen everything and it was too much.

A gun, then a second, then a third and our line blazed up again. To the tang of freezing was added the odour of wood pulp and powder.

"Ah, no!" said Clay. Weariness and a feeling of impotence had changed his voice.

The shells fell below us at random. The barrage drew nearer, receded, returned. We all felt it was unjust that we were beyond it. I knew that they were looking for spotters, but it was laughable if they thought they had a chance of hitting any. I hadn't given it a thought before, but there must be hundreds of them all round us.

Ross and Clay were lying down on their backs. Below

things took on the feverish speed of work in a factory—but then, were they not bent on exterminating men from the earth?

It wasn't a battle that the men on the plain were engaged in but dozens of simultaneous attacks, which gave the effect of a single effort. Once more the front was cut up.

To the left the Chinese had reoccupied our trenches, to the right in the direction of the woods they were retreating. In the centre, for no apparent reason, the two adversaries were retreating. Our whole line was in confusion. We saw the Chinese reserves setting out from the woods. They had moved their guns by harnessing them to bullocks. They shouted, hurried about, goaded the beasts and the guns were shifted inch by inch. The three tanks drove in the direction where their troops had occupied our trenches. One of our batteries spotted them and opened fire. The Red tanks put on speed. It seemed that the whole war was concentrated between this battery and the tanks. It became most beautiful. It was a slow ballet, or rather a ballet in which each movement lasted only a flash. At times the tanks were framed in columns of thrown up earth; they disappeared in them, emerging farther on without deviating from their path. That combat was the works! We trembled for them, we feared for them. To our rent ears the noise a single battery made was inaudible; for us it was a silent duel which had developed on the plain. The flaming bullets in the wintry sky followed the curve of the ground for a moment as though eager to fling themselves beyond the mountains before bursting at last in fountains of colours and steel.

Our troops assaulted the enemy trenches with hand grenades and the Chinese machine guns mowed them down. I did not want to look any more. I wanted to die, to be oblivious, to forget that I was balanced over the

void. Come, knights, offer your breasts, die in the saddle, your feet in the stirrups, your plumes swaying in the wind of the joust. Our emblems will be painted on your bucklers and in your ears the ivory horns will ring. You cannot see how sinister our war is. Not a flag, not a bright colour, not a fife, not a drum. Only little drab insects fighting, already covered with a brown shroud of soil.

Suddenly a weighty silence spread over the plain. We felt that everything was going to crack. The Chinese seethed like a river in spate. They advanced and from the last height their impetuous waves were about to engulf our men. Our flesh revolted. We stood up. We had to do something. Only the Chinese guns were firing now. We shivered at each of their salvoes and tears streamed from our eyes. The first Chinese wave was already on our line . . .

Clay, Ross, Cincinnati and I had already loaded our weapons. The plain, the ring of mountains, the broken woods—all these would be our graveyard and we should sleep not far from our dead army. I could not keep on going from one extreme to the other, wanting to rescue those who weakened, to attack those who killed like cowards, wanting to discover some meaning in rage. I was nothing, and yet just the same I was going to die for those of my race.

We shouted. Our lives had become beautiful, rich again and shortened by a few seconds. I hated myself for being heroic, but it was not me, it was the power of the world.

We only had time to feel sublime for a few seconds. Ahead of us, very high up, a deafening noise filled the vault of heaven. We did not see them cross the treetops, their noise arrived the same time they did ; they detached themselves from the dark hillsides, their fuselages caught the last gleams of the sun. I had no time to count them or to get more than a fleeting glimpse. The first hiss sped

downwards to the plain. Their noise alone would have been enough to kill, to make your entrails gush, to tear out your eyes, to split your arse—you and your heroism ! Bedbugs, that's what we were. We struggled, submerged in the most appalling tempest. Our breath was snatched away, all we swallowed was noise and our tortured lungs whistled. We had fallen in the snow, and we burrowed like moles, trying to disappear. I lost my gloves, my rifle sling was strangling me and I tasted earth. Why had I been allowed to stray so far from God ? My body was only water, nothing but trembling water which could never grow calm again. For a million years I had sought my courage and each time it had fled, and each time I thought it would be reborn with a new dawn. I thought I had loved and that I wanted to understand, but there was nothing but hatred within me.

A helmet of fire, a globe of flame enveloped the trees and passed over us. The snow melted. On all sides the trees began to flame of their own accord. We were on fire. The heavens had opened to make way for the flames of hell. Then I looked back, wrapped in intense heat, and I did not see you, my God. You must have been with the pilots.

The snow into which we had plunged saved us. Only splashes of the napalm spurted near us. The planes had dived correctly before releasing their first load of canisters, but they misjudged the distance and the bombs, carried on by their speed, crashed against the hills on the edge of the plateau beyond the Chinese concentrations. The whole of that part of the mountain was on fire. The nearest bomb to us fell in the place where the Chinese guns had been in position at the start. We got up painfully. The backs of our capes were burnt and in places we were smouldering. The napalm had set fire to the treetops and the outer branches. It was stifling, hot as midsummer

and rivulets of water began to flow past our feet. After a few seconds a sensation of intense heat ran through our hands and faces, the air was full of smoke and it became difficult to breathe. Great veils of soot began to fall all round us. At my side a tree trunk burst and from the split rose a column of steam. I looked at my three comrades without being able to recognize them. Then I understood what this sensation meant: our faces and hands had been scorched by the flame. Beneath our helmets we could only see black patches with the ivory white of eyes. One of the three men opened his mouth and showed his teeth. I thought I had known fear, but I was wrong. Noise is next to nothing, and you undergo a bombardment because you can't do anything about it; but when you have to raise your burnt hand and put it to your face, when you have to feel yourself to find out if you are alive or dead, that is the moment to call upon your mother and to rid yourself once and for all of your human tinsel.

It had to be done—the others were waiting. They were unrecognizable. An immense hope swept through me: as I had my eyes open I could see and therefore we could not be so badly burnt. I forced my tongue between my teeth, seeking my lips, I raised my hand to my neck, to my jaw, to my forehead—not my whole hand, only the tips of my fingers. I pressed lightly, then a little harder until I could feel the pressure. I began to run my fingers over my face, and something came away on my fingers. It was my flesh. My three comrades did the same. A flaming tree fell at our feet.

"I can see," said a burnt face. "Can you?"

We all began to shout: "I can see . . ."

I recognized Clay by his stretcher-bearer bags. We had fallen to our knees and fascinated, were examining each other's faces, trying to read on them the miracle of our

own. I did not think we were seriously burnt, but we could neither wait nor move in this state. I shook Clay.

"Open your bags!"

He did not reply. My hands hurt terribly. I did not know why I took pleasure in adding fuel to my anxiety—perhaps it was in the hope of being pitied. I fumbled among the tubes, boxes and bandages. Clay and the others watched me without moving. They were content that someone was attending to them. They had had enough.

I found a big tube. Unable to unscrew it I bit it open. It was oily and tasted of nothing. I filled my palm with it and rubbed Clay's face.

"Doctor," he said, "I must tell you that I'm not normal . . . shouldn't one try something else? . . ."

"Shut your yap," I said to Clay, "and wake up."

He shivered.

"Is that you, Joe? . . ."

"Yes."

"What are you playing at?"

He came out of his dream.

"Is it true you've got as much dough as that?"

Mechanically his hands began to move. He attended to Cincinnati while I bandaged Ross. Our faces and hands were soon swathed in bandages. We injected ourselves with morphine through our trousers. The smoke cleared away, revealing the plain. Several times, while we were giving ourselves first aid, the sky flamed red. Each time we felt the heat envelop us, followed by a current of icy air which flung us to the ground. The planes returned, correcting their aim.

There were still five of them in the sky. They circled round, while beneath us the woods burned. To our left there were a few trees intact and traces of snow. We dragged ourselves there. Leaning against the trees, in a kind of warm half-conscious dream, we watched the plain

burn. The morphine prevented us from smelling the odour of burnt flesh. I felt beatific and my eyes shone. I distinctly saw a plane turn and dive on a group of fugitives ; from its wing fell a plump fish which began to fly on its own—a fish without a tail. I laughed. It dived, it was going to touch the ground . . . It was like a sunbeam which suddenly bursts in your eye. The ground boiled and turned red. I was blinded by the light. I realized what it was: jellied petrol. The light died away and it was night in my head, then the pale daylight was slowly reborn. Down below men staggered, spread out, ran with their hair on fire. Their last breath was a scream before they turned to ashes. The bushes burned, no more trees, no more snow, the stones melted. New flames burst in quick succession and went out. In places the fire made tracks along the ground, leaving a black trail behind it as it went. Nothing but dead, dead, dead. Everything was slowly calcined. The plain smoked as it absorbed the lava from the sky, but it was not over. Those bastard Chinese who had no mothers, no feelings, continued to fight in the front line. How they could have got there in spite of the fire from our guns was almost miraculous. The Chinese are brave, much too brave.

I felt very well leaning against my tree. In the bottom of one of Clay's bags I found some coffee beans which I stuffed into my mouth and began to chew. There are eternities . . . I discovered a hope which I set aside for myself alone, I thought it would save me. I was wrong. One does not save oneself, one can only save others. I felt I was going to fall asleep—I was perfectly accustomed to horror, it was my familiar landscape. My genitals stirred. They were hot. The stench of corpses did not abate. This was the first time I had pictured a woman. Of course I could not have have made love, but I should have taken her hand and I should have caressed her eyes so that she

could pass in a dream without seeing the world.

I had the impression of having one eye open in the centre of my head. A war is long and monotonous. I longed to be at home. The morphine had made me cross the little wall I had built, allowing my memories to return, but my eye saw the war. The five planes climbed over our heads, passed over the treetops and dived again on our lines, machine-gunning as they flew. At times the bursts spattered the earth in front of our own men, but the attackers were cut up and little by little relinquished their grip.

How good it was with burning cheeks to watch a distant storm. I suppose it was the cold and the failing light which woke us up. In the undergrowth we could still see traces of light where fires were burning. Not a sound of the battle. Calm, serenity. A burning branch crackled, a boulder rolled down on its own, then a heart-breaking cry rose from the plain. Another cry, a moan and silence. With my bandages on I could not get at my watch, but it would soon be night. A noise had just started, a giant chain somewhere scraping the plateau. We tried to understand this noise. It was the tanks under way. We stood up. The noise seemed to increase. I rubbed my lips with a little snow to quench my thirst. My face and hands were on fire and I burned inside. Someone was walking behind us and I was convinced that two eyes were fixed on my back. Had the other three heard?

"Kroa, tch, tch . . ."

A voice whispered softly: "I can't move."

"Kroa . . ."

The others had heard. Someone fired at the same time as the Chinese. I turned round. In front of me, ten paces away, another figure loomed up, pointing a weapon. My bandaged fingers could not find the trigger. There was nothing I could do. A hail of bullets passed between my

legs ; I did not know if I ought to fall. The one of our four who had already fired opened up again. The shape toppled with a gurgle. I managed to release my first two fingers, but the shape did not move. The tanks were quite near. We started to shout. After a few seconds our throats were hoarse. Exhausted, we fell back and breathed heavily.

"Get up. We must go down. One, two . . ."

I counted again and we got up at three.

"Come on, get up !"

He was lying a pace from me and I kicked him, not knowing who it was.

"Get up !"

I wanted the other two to speak to find out who it was lying there. They were both leaning on their weapons with their heads down. At last I recognized Clay's bags. Who was the other ? I stretched out my hand, felt a cape, a grenade, a cartridge belt. No strings ! It was Ross. You could hardly see in front of you ; on the other hand you could hear the noise of the diesel motors humming in their steel cages.

"Cincinnati ! Cincinnati !"

I don't know if I cried out or if I whispered. A hand caught hold of my foot. It was his.

"Here, Clay !"

"What ?"

"Cincinnati's been hit."

I leant down, felt his body. There was his white mask.

"What's the matter with you ? We must go down."

His lungs gasped for air.

"Do you hear ?"

Clay was by my side. He held a burning branch above our heads. We no longer had faces, so how could I hope to see his red crosses ?

"Say, little Jew . . ."

"What?" he said. He was going to die. I could see his broken body.

"Was it you who fired?"

"Yes, it was him," said Clay.

"I'm going to die," Cincinnati whispered. "It's not so difficult."

Ross said: "It isn't fair. Why him?"

Our eyes had grown used to the darkness and the glow of the branch.

"We're going to get you down."

His eyes smiled.

"But I'm finished. If only you knew the prayers!"

"You mustn't die."

"You're hurting me," he said.

Ross moved away, fumbled in the snow looking for something. I tried to see what he was doing, which enabled me to move away from Cincinnati.

"Here," cried Ross. "Here, little Jew, here's one for you!"

He came up, dragging a body. He brought it into the firelight. Below the noise of the tanks grew fainter.

"Look . . ."

Ross held a Chinaman at arm's length. His bandaged hands were squeezing his neck. The yellow man had lost his cap, his cape was open and beneath the grey waistcoat and sleeveless shirt you could see his skin.

"No," said Cincinnati. "Why?"

For a second the man moved, then hung limp. Ross let him fall.

"Go," said Cincinnati. "You must go. It's not all over for you. You know . . . come here," he lisped. His voice had grown weaker. I glued my ear to his lips. "It's okay like this. Quite okay. I was so terribly sea-sick I could never go on that boat again. This is how I want to go

back. I'm only a Jew and this is a big war, too big for me. Nobody . . ."

He gasped.

"Come," said Clay.

"Nobody . . .".

He struggled, spread out his hands.

"Air . . . You won't see the end of it . . ."

He grimaced and died.

* * *

There were eighteen of us and now there were only three. It was a fine war, very fine. We shot at any moving shadow. There was no logic in it, and let anyone try to understand it who can. We ran, stumbling down the slope. In places the snow had melted. We lost our balance on patches of ice and slid till we came to firm soil again which our soles could grip on. The thought of warm food and sleep—that was what drove us on. We reached the bottom of the hill and were out on the plain. A kind of glue stuck to our feet, we trod over ashes which burnt our feet. It was what remained after the napalm. Slowly we pushed towards what we believed to be the south, hoping at each moment to come across our positions. In places there were heaps which gave under our feet, and the flat ground was also covered with a soft layer over which we made slow progress. They were corpses. At my first steps I thought I had been caught by seaweed and I struggled in terror. War makes corpses. What else can it possibly make? At first we tried to avoid them, but we were in a sea of corpses.

Fortunately it was dark and gradually it lost its horror. Now we were in the plain we realized that it was made up of little hills planted one behind another. Each time we came to a crest, hoping to find our goal, another hill loomed up. At last we came out of the burnt zone. The

trees were intact and there was snow. From time to time one of us stumbled and the others had to drag him to his feet. Perhaps we were walking in circles, for we found ourselves in a new sea of corpses. We floundered more and more. Once one of my feet slipped in a hole and my leg was trapped up to the thigh; I remained there, upright, lashing with my free foot. It was a cleft in a pile of dead. They could not drag me out and had to lift them away one by one. Fortunately it was very cold again. (here is nothing more monotonous than war. Our troops had retreated before the dead. Probably we were going to flounder about in circles until we fell on the Chinese. We had just got ourselves out of a great hole, half climbing half on our knees. With difficulty Ross managed to stand up, and at that moment shots passed over our heads. They seemed to come from the south, from our own men.

"Shut your mug, you crazy bastard," shouted Clay.

The firing increased. With a bound we leaped back in the hole and the firing stopped.

"Shit-bags!" roared Ross.

No one replied. Painfully I hitched myself up and crawled out of the hole. Our trenches were a hundred yards away.

"Hi," I cried, "No. 3 Squad retreating — — —"

I hadn't time to finish before the shooting began again. I dived back into the hole.

"That's hot," said Clay.

Half an hour later perhaps we heard a squad of men coming in the distance. We were glued against the side. They were still far away, approaching cautiously.

"Wait till they get up to us," whispered Clay. "From a distance they might fire."

The silence of the night bored into our skulls and then we heard: "Kroa, kroa, tch, tch . . ."

That was it. That was our date. No longer worth while

struggling: we had fallen across the Chinese. With our bandaged hands we tried to unhook our grenades but it was impossible.

"Kill me quick," said Clay. "I don't want them to get me."

He leant forward to embrace me.

"It's good to meet a real guy," he said. "Pity none of us had any dough."

"Kroa, tch, tch . . ."

The voices were quite near now. There was no more time. Five shapes stood on the edge of the hole. I was too tired: at the first stab of pain I would let myself go and then it would be like warm water washing me eternally.

"Bunch of c——s!" roared Ross. "Sons of bitches! Bastards!"

I closed my eyes.

Clay and the others were already in the next world. It is not difficult to die once you have got used to the idea.

"Kroa, tch, tch . . ." said a voice above us.

"Gooks? Chinks? Chinks?" came another voice with an enquiring accent.

I opened my eyes. We must be mad. They were American silhouettes with helmets and capes. They started talking among themselves.

"Americans?" asked Ross.

"You are Americans?" asked a voice, articulating each syllable.

"And you?"

"Turks."

"What?" said Clay. "Turks?"

"Yes," said the same voice.

We picked ourselves up and they helped us to get out.

"Turks?" said Ross, feeling one of them. Then he gave him a slap on the shoulder. "Turks! . . . And who are you with?"

"Kroa, tch . . ." they went.

"United Nations," said the one who spoke English.

We began to laugh. It was too ridiculous.

"What the bloody hell are you doing here?" asked Clay. "Aren't there enough whores in your own country?"

"Whores?" repeated the Turk. "You mean brothel-mother?"

They were Turks right enough. They did not smell like us. One by one they sniffed our faces, felt our masks.

"You perhaps Chinese spies."

"My prick," said Ross. "We're burnt, you old twat!"

"Turks," repeated Clay. "Was it you fighting today? Bang, bang?"

"Yes, bang, bang," said the one who spoke English. "Many dead. Us plenty eat . . ."

Once we had crossed their lines they gave us cigarettes. Later a jeep took us to one of our six inch batteries which was posted near the pass. The men made us coffee and gave us food. They had no doctor or first aid post—they were there to support the Turks' counter-attack which was to begin before dawn. We frightened them with our bandages, our tattered boots, our clothes in ribbons and the stench of death which entered their tent with us.

I cannot say I was overjoyed either to have returned to life or to see my own kind. Clay did not have the strength to change our bandages and we fell on the ground among the sleeping men. After half an hour or perhaps an hour a lieutenant woke us up. We opened our eyes, incapable of moving.

"They're flat out," said one of the battery sergeants.

"We want information," said the lieutenant "Make an effort."

He picked Ross up.

"What unit are you from?"

Ross belched and slumped forward against the lieutenant. That was all, and we were left in peace.

In my oblivion something pleased me. The retreat was going on, the army was disintegrating, and that is the only thing that can kill a war.

I slept. Slowly the night gave place to day. I no longer knew what date it was. We had been eighteen and now we were only three; the others were dead, stone dead. I had found no pleasure in killing, it was too quick and left no savour. My body was relaxed, felt neither cold nor hunger nor fear, it had tamed itself and was now resting. I knew that I should go on fighting until I had cleared up all the mysteries, but let them leave me in the dark until tomorrow, without dreams, without hope, without brotherhood. Let them leave me alone with my suffering, let me return to the innocence of my childhood: I could no longer be a man. My face burned, men trod on me——— Turks, Chinese, Greeks, Koreans. The sky spat the foam of war. Cincinnati was right. We should never see the end of it. Okay, I give up !

It was good in the darkness. Life was a star that twinkled faintly. The Jew's star had gone out, so had Rich's and Higgins's and all the rest of them. They had returned to the void, or else they had grabbed a new body on the way. I couldn't have cared less. Tomorrow if I lived I would find my hopes and my crimes again. It was for you, the jackals, to gobble up Chinese and Turks. A torch swayed, hanging on its cord. The wind whistled under the tent and in the black plain there was an exchange of gunshots.

* * *

" Well, soldier, what was the frontier like ?

" Never saw it, Captain."

" And the Yalu River ? "

"Never saw it," said Ross.

"You were Cooper's men, weren't you ? "

"Yessir."

"Take off your masks. It's not cold in here."

"Yessir," said Clay.

"It isn't a mask," said Ross, stepping back a pace.

"What about you ? " said the Captain, turning to me.

"What did you see ? "

"Nothing, sir."

"Didn't you cross the Chinese lines last night ? "

"Yessir, but there were only the dead, and the three live ones we killed."

"You want me to believe that there are no Red troops in front of us ? Is that what made you run away ? "

"I'm not asking you to believe anything, sir."

"You know I could have you shot ? "

Clay gave a gurgle.

"Button that up," whispered Ross.

One by one the men who had slept with us in the tent slipped away. A sickly light filtered through the tent flaps. This kind of braided twat couldn't wait for it to be day before interrogating us.

"An army of sissies," he cried, "that's what you are. Deserters."

He was taller than us, clean, with fair hair smartly cut on his neck. He was all dolled up for parade and smelt of talcum powder. Since my morphine injection I was particularly sensitive to smells. Passing beneath the torch, he relit it.

"We weren't running away," said Ross. "We were behind them."

The officer gave a leap.

"Wise guy, huh ? "

It was our fault, we had been warned. There is nothing worse than a heavy artillery officer. Perhaps its

the noise that sends them crazy. They fire week after week without seeing a soul, and then when you bother to reply it upsets them. He undid his holster to take out his revolver. The gentle fatherland, that was it.

"Yellow skunks," he hissed.

"I'm a stretcher-bearer with an army certificate," Clay told him, "and we're wounded men."

"Take off your bandages ! "

Clay sat Ross on a pile of blankets. He dumped his bags on the ground, fumbled with his fingers and brought to light a pair of long polished scissors.

"Get on with it, then," he said, handing them to the officer. "You take them off him—sir."

I was standing at the entrance to the tent. The officer took a step forward.

"Let me pass," he said, "or I'll call for help."

"You're not calling anybody," said Clay. "No one would come, and you haven't even got our names."

"You're right there, I haven't, but ———"

Clay stood up.

"Captain," he said, "I can't cut with my hands like this. It's up to you to do it."

The officer cut away the gauze near the temples, then along the forehead and down to the neck. His shoulders were bowed and his hands trembled.

"Now take them off," said Clay.

"No, I ———"

Clay gave him a shove and he knelt down again beside Ross. He took the mask in his great hands. I felt the beginning of the tug and then it came off. Sharp blades pierced me. My eyes hurt. The right part of Ross's face was swollen and suppurating, on the left side there was no more skin, it had come off on the dressing. We could see the red, raw flesh from the forehead to the neck and a white eye blinking.

"Look," said Clay. He caught the officer by a brace. "Stick your nose in it."

The man bent forward and his head was on a level with the wound.

"No, no." He looked like a lost child. "Was it the cold up there in the mountains?"

"No," said Clay, "it was the fire."

"The fire?" repeated the officer. "The fire? So cold and fire are the same thing?"

"You bet."

The officer stood up and began to sway.

"Well, I'll be seeing you. We weren't made for war..."

He hiccupped, put his hand to his mouth and disappeared.

"It's nothing," said Clay, "the skin will grow again."

An hour later the men from the battery found us a stretcher-bearer whom they brought in a car. He was a young man who had disembarked only a few days before and he did not know how to begin. The gunners stood round watching while he gave us first aid. After much effort he managed to get rid of our bandages. Our hands were almost intact, a little skin and flesh was missing in patches on our faces, but what really hurt were our necks which we had left bare and our collars had chafed them.

* * *

It was no longer the same sky, the same plain, as yesterday. Low clouds hid the mountains. We were near a crossroads and round us no traces of the battle were to be seen. It appeared that there were less tanks and guns involved than we thought. After everyone had fed the stretcher bearer left. He wanted to take us with him but we were in no hurry.

"There's no ambulance," he said, "and you'd have to walk anyhow."

The river in the valley was the Chongchon. Just beyond the pass through the mountain lay the town of Kunuri. This was the town the Chinese had tried to capture in order to cross the river and cut off our retreat. During the night our tanks reformed and crossed the river. There were still three of them and a battery of guns defending the pass. Any moment now and our battery would be on the move, for there were only a few covering patrols behind us. The gunners had several trucks and we could stay with them as far as the crossing of the Chongchon.

As we left the tent we took a look at our feet and our legs: a layer of ash was glued to them and our trousers were bloodstained up to the thighs. We scraped off the muck and cinders mingled with flesh and pieces of bone. No one had a change of clothes. Ross and I wanted Clay to give us more shots of morphine, but there were hardly any phials left and he said it would be better to keep them in case something happened: we had let the stretcher-bearer go, who had a boxful. Sitting on boxes on the top of a truck we smoked our cigarettes, and that was pleasant. Down below the gunners rushed about shouting. I should have liked to see the captain again to get an idea what he looked like in daylight, but it appeared he had gone to wait for us on the other side of the river. They were all too kind to us—we were not so seriously burnt. What upset them was that they were American bombs which had done that to us. From our perch we could see a little more of the plain, but there were too many clouds to see the woods where we were burnt.

“How long will it take to get to the river?”

“Three or four hours,” replied one of the men.

“So we have three or four hours peace.”

All the trucks were under way, their blunt snouts

swaying. Ours moved off. A quarter of an hour later we were in the pass. Towards eleven o'clock we had crossed the river on a very low wooden bridge, which was ice-bound. We were in the valley, out of the mountains.

The army, regrouped and reformed, beat a sad retreat. For several days without stopping our heavy material trickled to the rear: the great American expedition towards the frontier of the Chinese Republic was returning to the sea as fast as it could. Tanks, guns, twenty-wheeled trucks, bulldozers, sectional bridges, collapsible airfields, millions of tons of petrol, munitions and food, were all saved. All this was incalculable in precious money. The only things that were left were the dead in very great numbers to mark the path of the retreat.

The temperature had risen several degrees, there were hardly any traces of the snow left, but it was still freezing. After the river we left the battery. They took up their gun positions ready to fire, waiting for the patrols of the First Corps to cross the river. A column of tanks set out ahead of us. Despite our signs they would not give us a lift.

"There are trucks further down," they said.

A captain medico looked at us.

"Nothing wrong with your feet? You can march then."

We marched. The knowledge that there were no more Chinese on that side of the river did not make up for the uneasiness that took hold of us to feel once more the weight of the army and its regulations. For days and days we had been really free. Now of course we had to pay. Had we not already paid that morning for having returned to the half crazy? Batch after batch, the isolated and the lost made along column on the road. We all looked the same—the same beards, the same twisted boots, the same dressings. No one spoke. We marched and the sinister sound of our dragging footsteps could be heard along the

road. Some had thrown away their helmets and others wore them slung ; most of us had dumped our ammunition—it was heavy and no use at all here. No one had brought back any trophies, no one talked about or cursed the dirty yellow men or the bastard Communists. With us were a few officers, lieutenants and captains. They were not proud either. We had a success, we three, with our bandages. The road was gravelled, with low walls running along side, and there were many trees—pines, birches and others I did not know. Between the trees could be seen the terraced land. In front of us rolled a convey of trucks with their hoods down and we looked at their cargoes with indifference: dead men, nothing but dead men. In some of them they were piled so high that their feet hung over the side. The convoy stopped and we passed beneath those dead feet. The planes were up. Towards late afternoon a squadron of bombers appeared and behind us we heard a series of explosions.

“They’re bombing the bridges and the ice on the river,” someone said.

Later we were made to climb into a truck.

I woke up at dawn with a headache and aching in every limb. The truck had stopped. During the night they had distributed boxes of iron rations. Clay and Ross slept curled up on the boards. With difficulty I managed to get to the rear and jumped down. Despite the cold of dawn I felt it was no longer freezing. Some men were talking in front. A car with its headlights on pulled up.

“Who are they ? ” asked a voice.

“All the stragglers, sir.”

“Send them back to Anju then.”

“Yessir.”

There was a silence.

“May I point out, sir, that there are wounded in this convoy.”

" Serious cases ? "

" How should I know, sir."

" Well, no matter. Fighting won't do them any harm."

" No, sir."

Between the wheels of the truck I saw a pool of water. I leant down and drank. It was Saturday. But what was time ? It was still a long monotonous page. I managed to climb in again without making a noise. The car with its lighted headlamps made off to the head of the column. I shook Clay and Ross.

" What's eating you ? " said Ross.

" We've got to get out of here."

" You've been dreaming," said Clay. " The war's over."

" Over ? Don't kid yourself. The convoy's turning back. They're fighting at Anju."

" Are you certain ? "

Now we were afraid the truck would start off with us in it, and yet we had to collect our things and weapons. I was forced to wake up a guy to light a match for us.

" What's going on ? "

" We're getting out of here."

" Where to ? "

" Hospital "

" Oh, yes. Poor sods. It must hurt."

One by one we jumped down from the truck. The man went back to sleep. Someone came up. A lamp shone on us. It was an armed guard.

" Where the hell do you think you're going ? "

" To have a piss," said Clay.

" Do you have to make a family affair of that and take your guns with you ? "

" What about you ? What do you do with your f——g gun ? "

" What do I do ? " repeated the guard.

" You ought to know," said Clay. " You make me shit."

The man turned round and left.

"You're quite certain?" Clay asked me.

"Sure."

"They took our names last night."

"So what," I said.

We slipped down a battered street between dark houses.

"It's quite a town," said Ross.

Slowly the day broke. I noticed a house without a roof. Through the windows you could see the sky. We rushed into it, piled ourselves in a corner and waited. Shortly before it was quite light we heard the convoy start. One after another the trucks turned round.

It was light. Through the window I saw a tree with only the stumps left, and on the trunk a board was nailed with the words, beneath an arrow: *Sukchon. Military Police*. Near the tree was a little bit of tiling which disappeared below ground and to the right a telegraph pole with the wires dangling. On the other side of the street a few houses were still standing but all of them without roofs, only walls. Behind them a tall factory chimney, emerging from a gigantic pile of bricks, pointing to the grey sky and in the distance we could make out two mountain chains with patches of snow on their flanks. Someone had just passed, pushing a bicycle, its lonely bell echoed among the stones and puddles. Then came a woman clothed in white, and then another couple, one with a white blouse and trousers holding an open umbrella. Two children came towards us, barefooted and splashing about in the puddles. They had dusky skins and flat noses. When they saw me through the window, hopping from one foot to another, they croaked with an idiotic smile and pointed their fingers at me. No, they were crying.

* * *

More than a week passed Our wounds had grown scars.

In the disorder of the retreat we slipped unnoticed. We managed to spend a day and a night in a hospital full of frost-bite cases, but the hospital was evacuated and we were flung out, or rather we were left with dozens of others on a deserted strategic airfield. There were not enough transport planes, so we made our way southwards on foot by easy stages. Sometimes the military police stopped us and attached us to one unit or another, where we only remained long enough to eat. Then we set out again, and in this way we came to Pyongyang.

By all the roads from the north our material continued to roll southwards. At the entrance to Pyongyang our troops were in combat positions. They seemed very nervous. This time a major gave us an epic lecture on courage, but he calmed down after Clay had an epileptic fit and Ross adroitly managed to make himself bleed. We had got a taste for liberty : this being incessantly on the move went to our heads, we revelled in it and it increased our desire for adventure. But above all we had made so many discoveries about ourselves and the army that we were astonished at the results we could obtain with a little bluff and perseverance.

For myself, what prompted me to follow this course was an irrepressible feeling of disgust for anything that wore braid. Each time an officer looked at me or opened his mouth to speak I felt my rage boiling up. I knew that it was better for me to live apart like an unsociable beast until I could re-adapt myself. All the hypocrisy, cowardice, all the cold, cynical calculation of our ruling caste was there blatant on their hideous, blind, slavish mugs and it was because I was like them and could understand them that I felt ill. I felt too that it was I who was leading Clay and Ross astray. I tried to talk to them, but they were too brutalized, too debased by our civilization once they returned to the mass to preserve the brilliant fire

which their solitary war had unveiled in them—which did not prevent them from being saner and simpler than myself, and when they managed to slough the veneer which imprisoned them, from being infinitely more human and brotherly.

Because nerves were growing tauter we reckoned it more prudent to attach ourselves to a unit. We now belonged to the 8th Army. If anybody pulled us up we could always give them the number of our company. One night we were woken up by engineer officers. We had to dress. It was perhaps two o'clock in the morning. Through streets jammed with convoys and civilians we were marched to the station sheds. There the sergeant split us up into groups and explained how we had to fire the clothing and spare parts dumps. At dawn the whole of that part of the town was in flames, throwing up enormous mushrooms of smoke which rained down a black and sticky soot. When we got back to our billets we saw that other fires had been lit. Everything that could not be carried away was being destroyed. It was the 5th December. That afternoon we left the town, over which lay a gigantic crown of flames, in a truck. Over a bridge of barges we crossed the Taedong, a shallow sandy river through which a stream of grey water ran between the ice floes. Upstream, on the main bridge of the town which bombs had smashed and hurled into the water, we could see files of Koreans dragging themselves on all fours over the beams or balancing themselves on the twisted girders. From afar they looked like a swarm of ants trying to reach the bleak plain from the town. It was not freezing but the weather was cold and hostile. On the far bank a black and white crowd waited patiently its turn to scramble over the bridge. Sometimes a form with a bundle tied on its back flung its arms wide and without a sound fell into the water. It was war under a melancholy sky.

Day after day we went down towards the south. Detours, halts and departures. The war was nearly over. The Chinese army could have picked us up but the Reds, trotting along behind us, were content to drive their spearhead to the east, to the junction of our army with the other allied troops. Many of our men had remained in the north: they had no chance of joining us. From the exit of the mountains the Chinese front had stretched right across the country, trying to annihilate the Marines of the 10th Corps, who ended by beating both the encirclement and the cold. We crossed the 38th Parallel towards the middle of December, at exactly the same spot where we had crossed it on the way to the mountains. The sign-board was still there, welcoming us. They had simply nailed it to the other side of the post. Days passed without a gunshot. Nothing but aircraft circling tirelessly above our heads.

When the Chinese masses trotted in our rear, methodically, mechanically, without hatred or love, our planes released their napalm bombs and the mushrooms of fire rose again in the countryside. The landscape was flat with few valleys and only became hilly towards the horizon. Our trucks and heavy material had disappeared. Here and there we came across a burnt out truck or tank by the roadside. For the first few weeks the roads were choked with a stream of civilians dragging or pushing, hugging packages, boxes, sacks, chickens and bits of furniture. Later they disappeared, leaving little corpses like white dolls, twisted and broken, the whole length of the road. I do not know if these weeks were not more terrible than the fighting in the mountains. Everything we did seemed pointless. Each death, from whichever side it came, was a crime pointing its finger at us. If the yellow men had only had a little artillery, bombers and

fighters, this well-calculated retreat would have been turned into an unprecedented rout.

We were in a dreary country, where a kind of powdery moss covered a brown soil upon which volcanoes, now extinct, had poured their lava. Clumps of bracken, little trees and then a valley descending to the sea away to the west ; rivers with just enough water for the wind to ripple, long strips of sand hollowed out by the water which the far off mountains silted up ceaselessly. Great squares of earth, brown or reddish ochre in colour, where nothing had yet been sown and where sometimes one saw stocky little bullocks with gleaming hides. Tiny villages with flat-roofed houses of wood or plaster, around which scurried thin, dirty folk who as soon as they saw us began to busy themselves about their brick ovens built to one side. Every night for no reason fires were lit and went out. We mounted guard, slept, ate and mounted guard again. Now our planes were in the air night and day, machine-gunning, bombing, setting fire to Chinese emplacements. They turned night into day. To get some sleep you had to throw yourself in a hole with a blanket over your head. The planes dropped bright flares which lit up the fields, the woods, the forests, the corners of the rooms, with a crude bluish or greenish light. Unknown men replaced those who died. At the start we were hostile to them but little by little the memory of the dead disappeared and in turn the faces of the newcomers were absorbed in the daily monotony. In our first action we drew near together, united by our misery ; there were those who would be the new dead, whose names we should forget because there was nothing one could do about it. Sometimes I regretted that it took this butchery and this denigration to make us feel that each one of us were in some measure bound to the flesh of others. There must be something

more in life than this. Each night I thought about it, but I was too tired and I soon fell asleep.

* * *

A month had already passed. New skin had grown on my face and hands, but Ross still had a piece of skin on his cheek which would not heal. We were in the first few days of January. It was not so cold but very damp. The officers were seized by the same torpor as ourselves; once more they lost their arrogance and disdain. They too were muddy, dirty and tired.

We stopped to the north-east of Seoul, in front of a ruined wall which girdled the town. On a hill to our right stood a large house with a multitude of roofs in the Chinese style. We made for it that night. The house was empty and all that remained were a few torn tapestries on the wall. On 2nd January, I remember, we went into Seoul to fetch some supplies and ammunition. It was impossible to get into the town: our whole army was rolling southwards, obstructing the streets, and had we got caught up in their stream we should have had to follow them. Shortly after our return the whole sky lit up red, but it was quiet near our Chinese castle. Our tanks covered our flank. I was pleased to be spared the sight of that crowd of civilians trying to escape. The previous night our troops had been forced to fire on them to let the last train leave the town. It was forbidden for refugees to use the military roads, nevertheless they streamed out of Seoul like terrified rats seeking a passage. It was dark but the flames from all the fires lit up the landscape in front of us.

Day broke and the tanks announced that they had orders to retire at 15.00 hours. Our packs and bundles were ready, or rather we had not unpacked. With the destruction of our reserves the supply depot had become very generous and one only had to ask to be issued with new

clothes and weapons. We were not anxious since for a month we had learnt how to retire.

Towards ten o'clock a burst of fire came from the north-west, it diminished, only to grow in violence again. We felt a little relieved—if they were fighting there we would be able to pull out at our ease. The first thing we had done after installing ourselves was to study our path of retreat and landmark it carefully in case we had to leave by night. Ross had discovered a road which led to the Han river avoiding the shelled quarters and the centre.

At ten-thirty the tanks opened fire. We could see nothing from our positions and their intercomm. did not answer us, but we distinctly heard the sharp crack of their guns and the rattle of their machine guns. We were only waiting for one thing: for them to leave so that we could go too. That was our mistake. The Chinese attack on Seoul ran up against that group of tanks, made them wheel and come full belt on us. Suddenly the Chinese were all there. Taking cover behind a few clumps of trees and bushes, they opened fire with their mortars. Between each salvo their troops advanced on us by short rushes. Clay, Ross and I were together, sheltered by a corner of the wall. By climbing over we could have left the battle and, by taking Ross's path, have reached the other side of the river but it so happened that the Chinese sent a hail of bullets right against our wall, raising a cloud of dust and plaster which blinded us. For a few moments we could see nothing. We remained on our bellies, struggling not to rub our eyes, waiting foolishly for the tears to wash out the dust and plaster. When we could see again it was too late; our men were fighting and we could not leave. Once the Chinese were beaten back. They disappeared and their mortars began again. We crouched in our foxholes, waiting for the firing to stop so that we could get away. During a lull we heard the tanks

leaving—they tried to disengage us but the terrain was unfavourable and they could not get to us. We made our second mistake by not taking advantage of the fact that the Chinese had come to grips with our tanks. Once they were gone the whole weight of the attack fell on us. Our corpses began to hinder us, everything grew hazy and our fire gradually weakened. Several times the lieutenant blew his whistle and waved his arms in despair, but we had to keep our heads down. Finally someone got the bright idea of using our mortars and the shells began to spurt in quick succession from the reddening tubes. For the second time the Chinese retreated and took up their position further back. This was the break we had been waiting for.

"Retire as far as the first houses!" shouted the lieutenant.

He said no more, he was shot in the back and fell.

We ran, doubled up, like a flock of sheep terrified by the storm. I saw Clay and Ross. Someone stumbled and caught hold of me, bringing me down, then came a new bunch of running men. I had not time to get up before a hail of bullets passed over my head, bringing down the runners. Behind me I heard more footsteps. Fifty yards away I saw Clay who had stopped to look for me. I got up and ran. One of the wounded men began to fire, the running footsteps behind me ceased, Clay's face grew larger until I could almost touch it. He was there at the corner of a house—there was a little garden, a tree. What was he doing? He opened his arms and fell to the ground. His eyes were filled with horror.

"Clay . . ."

At that moment I was lifted from the ground. Closing my eyes I saw the wall collapsing on me.

Something made me struggle: my lungs were going to burst. The chinstrap of my helmet strangled me, then it snapped. Once more I was in a ball of fire. I did not

lose consciousness. I came down again, landed once more. Like a stiff plank I hit the ground with my heels. The pain lashed me and I rolled over while all round me earth, bricks and gravel subsided silently. That was my new domain, silence. Something ran from my mouth, I could not move, yet my eyes were open. A shadow leant over me and shook me, a hand closed my eyelids.

"He's dead."

It was Clay's voice.

"Are you sure?" asked Ross.

"Didn't you see how the shell caught him?"

They were crazy, I wasn't dead. I had to move something so that they would take me with them. Clay put his arms round me and kissed me.

"Come on," said Ross. "Come on!"

I was stiff—bound. The shadow stood up.

"You were a good guy, Joe"

Then there was nobody and I began to make out the pasty grey sky. In a few seconds I was going to be killed. New steps running. The sky turning black, then red, then white. A thick foam filled my mouth. I had left my body. I hovered over Seoul and there was the boundless sea, the sun and the beaches of my country. The world turned black and I fell back into the depths.

PART TWO

SPRING IDYLL

'KROA . . . Kroa, tch, tch . . .'" Someone was murmuring near me. I wanted to lift my hands to my face. I saw the movement taking place in my mind but I could not carry it out: I was bound. I tried to move my legs, tried to recall my feet. My bonds were too tight. But why were they murmuring? I could not tell if my eyes were open . . . I had to cry out . . . There seemed to be a gag over my mouth, but perhaps it was my tongue that was swollen and dry. I tried to open my jaw and pushed with the tip of my tongue. It wasn't my mouth! I had to cry out so that they would kill me. I had seen so many men killed by them. I couldn't recognize anything about myself, especially that strange mouth. Without having to unclench my teeth I found a hole, and then my terror and the pain made me scream. It succeeded in breaking the dam in me. They had not killed me, they had left me to die. Perhaps they had put out my eyes. My body had no warmth. Little by little my terror subsided—it took up too much of my strength. I knew I was going to accept my death.

The murmurs drew closer. I should have liked to weep—not to arouse their pity, for the white man's sentimentality has no meaning for them—but because I had no other refuge, and by so doing I should draw nearer to what I was going to leave and return quickly to my childhood. Jesus, how weak I was in flesh and spirit! How much ignorance and cowardice had I still got to kill. I did not know they were so deep-rooted; I did not know that a man's life was at the same time such a dark and brilliant tragedy; I did not know that we were all children of God.

Why had they granted me this reprieve ? Now it was so simple and I could understand everything, it was too late. Funny, I felt that with a little effort I could free that intense happiness which lay somewhere just beneath my skin, but I was so used to hating and despising, to wounding and destroying that my happiness would never flow freely. I did not even deserve to die fully conscious.

They were there whispering in my ear. Something touched my lips. It was a blade entering my mouth and throat, a slippery blade which quickened my wound then spread coolly in my depths like a stream.

It must be the Chinese.

"Kroa, kroa . . ."

Between the syllables I could hear the sound of their breathing. I was going, but I should have liked to see once more what daylight looked like, how the stars twinkled. Another drop of water trickled between my lips, then another noise, something that went "tick-tack, tick-tack." It grew softer, as did my own breathing. I was on the brink of unconsciousness, only my will was still attached to earth. "Tick-tack . . ." It must be a bowl wobbling. Where had I come from and what had been my journey ?

Once more I came out of the world of silence and darkness, that world in which there are no bitter sorrows or heart-rending cries. The thing continued its "tick-tack", new drops of liquid reached my throat. Hands felt my body. They must be frisking me. A hand passed over my forehead, then down to my wound. I was going to cry out again. I was going to be extinguished slowly, without a great burst of flame, like a lamp whose oil has come to an end. A week before, the idea of disintegrating, of being buried in the soil of Korea would have been painful, but now nothing mattered. The kingdom of God was here the same as anywhere else. A wave of warmth

ran through me. Why didn't they untie my bonds? The thing had stopped, something rumbled very far away, giving me an inkling of the distant stars. My pain had lessened and everything was peaceful. I was lying on something hard, but it was not the soil, it was faintly warm. There was no light. I felt that I had gained a little strength. It must be night . . . they would kill me at dawn, and so I was still a long way from my death.

What remained to me except to return to the past? There was my house, I saw it looming out of the park as I went towards it. I was six years old and my mother held my hand. She spoke to me, but I did not want to understand because she spoke French, that hateful language. "*Tu n'aimes pas marcher avec moi? . . . Pourquoi ne réponds-tu pas?*"

"Why don't you talk like everybody else?"

"Oh," she said, "*il faut que toi aussi, tu sois méchant. Regarde.*"

She led me away from the path and we walked across the fields. The grass had grown and it was almost as high as my head. It smelt strong and the little points tickled me so that I wanted to laugh, wanted to roll on the sun-drenched earth. My resentment melted. I understood every word she said. But why did there have to be people who were called French and who spoke different from the Americans. My mother's French was warm and mannered. The workers in the fields, the postman and the men who came to the house could not speak that language. The French women must all be women like my mother.

"*Tu sens comme c'est bon?*"

She had taken me in her arms.

"*Jean, regarde le printemps.*"

"*Oui.*"

"*Tu vois que tu comprends!*"

The years passed with their changing seasons, covering

the earth with snow, freeing the spring waters, warming the lands and then making the russet leaves fly in the autumn wind. The years passed and I made the acquaintance of death. My grandfather, then my mother. I grew tall and my chest expanded. The rude climate and the open-air life, the heritage of the men of my race gave me lean hard muscles and a narrow insensitive spirit, which enabled me to reject what I found disagreeable, including death. I learned French against my will by hearing my mother speak it. Why hide it from myself now, I made her suffer by my harshness and my indifference. I thought that to be a man one had to be hard, and I was so blind that I did not see I was cruel to her because she was gentle. When she died my father and I thought we were completely rid of this sentimental stranger. I was unhappy but not moved. It needed that other one, the real stranger, to come into the house and creep into my father's bed for life to strike me forcibly for the first time, and to awaken in me everything that attached me to the lands of my grandfather and my mother from across the sea. But I was tough and stupid. I struggled. I thought that my new emotion was weakness. I thought that the trick of chance which had brought me something like wealth was going to make me a sentimental and snivelling simpleton who would be excluded from the robust and powerful way of life led by my father and those who were identical with him in everything. We were (and we still are) quite rich, already possessing the veneer of inherited wealth, a vain and sterile enough veneer made up of manners and customs whose vulgarity fills the emptiness and where the power of money replaces all sentiment and all character, to such an extent that if suddenly that money disappeared we should be merely puppets, morally inferior to the meanest labourer. States of mind like mine, unless they suffer a revolutionary shock very young, progress by stages

—that is to say they embrace a duality. You search painfully, for the good which you suspect and yet you continue to compromise with yourself, hoping that something will be strong enough to awaken you and cut you off irrevocably from what you do not want to be. Will power is not sufficient: it is like a weather-cock which turns with any wind. I allowed myself to be carried away by the possibilities which money gave me and by the vitality of my age. I had to kill my sensibilities just as all the men I envied had to. It never entered my head that they could not have had any, and this was the price they paid for power.

I took my time, but at last I understood that my father was neither good nor evil, that once he had overcome and forgotten his own crises he was a complete materialist with no other potentiality. A strong brute with deep vitality no doubt, to whom weakness was unknown and who could admit of nothing save his toughness—animal and physical toughness, which men like my father want to impose on the world to govern their ludicrous empires in peace. They are neither good nor evil, the world is neither comprehensible nor tangible to them in any other way. I went towards the house. It was there, quite near me—my door, my roof.

No. I had nothing left me but my pain. Had I slept? Someone had cut my bonds: my hands were free. I moved, wanted to call out—but in what language? I didn't know a word of Chinese. They had distributed little books to us with phrases: I had one in my pack. No, the simplest was just to cry out. That could be understood by any one.

I cried, abandoned myself, gave up. The whole right side of my face was one streak of pain and there was only a little air passage between my lips.

"Tick-tack . . ." The object began to wobble again.

It was certainly a bowl, and each time it tipped water ran into my mouth.

"Kroa, kroa . . ."

There were more of them now, three or four. "Tick-tack" went the bowl. A pale and trembling point of light shone before my eyes. Now they were all speaking at once. The bowl stopped, the light went out and they were gone.

I was alone, and it is difficult to be alone. Beneath me was something warm. Was I wounded in the back? Too many questions . . . Everything began to crumble in my head and I returned to the country where there are no colours and no dreams.

* * *

I was awakened by something running over my face. I thought it must be a rat which was going to bite me, and I began to struggle and call for help.

"Mossi . . . Mossi," whispered a voice near me.

Two hands took me by the shoulders and gently laid me down again.

"Mossi."

And then there was a stream of "Kroa, kroa, tch, tch . . ." They were gentler than those we were used to. Someone was trying to solve the thick mystery of an unknown tongue.

"Chinese?" I asked.

A small, somewhat calloused hand came to rest on my forehead and began to caress my hair. Blindly I felt for the body with my fingers, seeking the one who had spoken.

"Mossi," repeated the voice.

My hands were caught and brought gently back to my sides. I breathed through my nostrils. The air was fetid, with a faint odour of flint. The bowl began its swaying, warm water ran over my face, someone was washing my wound.

I could not possibly be blind. I was sure I had seen a light. There was something over my eyes. Like a madman I put my hands to my face. My fingers brushed the flesh beneath my right cheekbone. I felt my eyes: there was no dressing, only a sticky layer.

"Mossi."

The voice was pathetic and nothing else mattered. I grimaced like a child about to cry, and little by little I grew calm once more. My right hand caught the hem of a garment, I clutched it with my fingers: I did not want to be left alone.

Later I had the impression there were several people round me, moving me about, turning my wrists and legs. I did not know whether they were going to torture me or what they wanted. I wanted only one thing, to die. But the bowl went on swaying and the water flowed over my face.

"Mossi."

For hours and days I did not unclench my fingers. How I wanted someone to take me by the hand and lead me to what awaited me, help me to die. Then, gently, someone unclenched my fingers and I let go the garment.

Great snowflakes fell noiselessly. Through the window of my room I saw the open fields. Now I was only a blind man, and soon my whole back was burning.

"Mossi."

My eyes were sponged with a damp cloth and gradually layers of something were removed. I felt the blood beat in my eyelids and then the effort they made to open. At that moment all the men helped me, all of them, and the light burst on me.

"Mossi."

Surprise made me sit up. I was giddy. The two hands laid me down again. My eyes were open and I could see. A woman sat beside me.

"Mossi," she said.

Resting her cheek against her clasped hands, the woman shut her eyes, opened them, shut them again. I was to sleep.

"Where am I ? "

She shrugged her shoulders, and then I heard the familiar sound of war. A barrage was firing behind us, but it was very far away, probably on the other side of the river. I made an effort to find out what was burning in my back. The woman restrained me and I fell asleep again, trying to seize the hem of her skirt.

* * *

The days slipped by, I do not know exactly how many. There were already five notches in the bricks above my head, but then how many days had I been unconscious ? I did not think I should have been able to adapt myself to what I actually saw had I been fully conscious at first. Things happened in such a way that I seemed to have been reborn, to have found a new patience and vitality I had never suspected. And yet it would have been impossible to find a universe narrower and more uncertain than mine. It was fate which somewhat reluctantly brought out all the best in me as we went along. I was neither morally nor physically equipped for this ordeal. Quite the contrary, the sand castle of my life had crumbled, carrying away at the same time all that war had brought out, which I thought solid.

Now I knew that one had to conquer in order to live. I knew too that luck is unnecessary. It may go against one—that is unimportant. The value of a life lies only in the power of its struggle. It was not only the animal desire to live which animated me, nor the mirage of returning to the life I had left behind, but something else—a new and powerful sentiment, the wealth of which flowed deeply

and patiently. This was the ordeal I had lost and won.

I still had a long time to wait before they came to fetch me. As soon as I heard their footsteps near the oven I would make the sixth notch. For the moment I was like a sleeper who wakes up and cannot say whether he has dozed for a quarter of an hour or slept the whole night. To be quite honest I did not understand what was happening. I tried to reflect in order to find an explanation for their attitude. At times I thought they were waiting for some special occasion to give me up—in any case why shouldn't they give up an American soldier? We couldn't exchange a single word, they and I, with the exception of the "Mossi" of the old woman. The first three days after I regained consciousness I was too weak even to look for an answer. I slept and that was all, but later there was nothing else to do. I managed to overcome the fear I had about my wound. At first I did not dare to touch it; I had to get each of my fingers used to following my contours until it became a familiar part of myself. I thought I must have a broken jaw. They tended it in their own way and I did not interfere. Once I got rid of the fear caused by my condition I spent a whole day toying with the idea of leaving this place and rejoining my pals. This wish hastened my recovery and I managed to keep it going, although I knew I could not put it into practice.

Seoul must be entirely surrounded, I thought. The Chinese were fighting on the other side of the river. With my frame and my bandaged head I could not get very far even in disguise.

The night I got up for the first time I walked from the oven to the room in which I slept. Once I knew it all there was no more mystery, but before that every gesture of theirs had thrown me into a panic. Had they picked me up out of the street? Had they dragged me a long

way from where I was wounded ? Who were they ? I had no idea. I could not yet distinguish them by their faces ; I recognized them only by their shape and age.

In all Korean houses there are brick ovens which are kept lit the whole winter to warm the rooms. I was living inside one of these ovens. It was not easy to get in or out. The oven formed a brick cube with a trapdoor at the bottom, and around the draught chimney runs a little balcony of masonry where people lie for the night. What had happened ? I did not know, but one of the rooms which my oven heated had caved in, burying one side of the oven. That was where they made me a hiding place. In the morning they raised the beams and stones and slid me on to a kind of platform hidden by the ruined room. Thus I had the oven on one side and the collapsed ceiling on the other, making a watertight shell around me. They heated the oven but fortunately not too much. What I did not understand was why they took me out at night and put me to sleep in a little empty room which led into the one where they slept. I tried to resist and indicated that I preferred to go back to the oven, but they did not see it that way and brought me back by force into the little room. In the middle of the night I was woken up by hands shaking me : in the candle-light the old woman's face looked frightened. I was tired and ill-tempered. After lying on the ground I was cold and did not want a new session of gestures which no one understood. The old lady made a sign to me to get up. She and two men dragged me across the room to the oven. They squatted down and made me touch the cold ashes, then they went "boom-boom" with their mouths, shaking their heads and pointing to the oven. After a few days' careful thought I decided that they could not light the fire at night because of the war, but it did not explain why they shifted me about like this.

From dawn, when I was back in my hole and they had replaced the beams behind me, I remained alone until night. Not a glimmer of light trickled in, a little air entered through the cracks above my head. I lay directly on the bricks and I thought I should go mad with pain, so unaccustomed was my body to such a hard surface. At long intervals I heard someone rake the ashes, arrange the wood and shut the iron door, and then I was alone again. At last I could recognize all the noises which came to my ears, however muffled. I did not know how accurate my guesses were, but the very idea of picking out familiar sounds was enough to delight me. If my strength had continued to return normally I think the temptation would have been too great and I should have ended by refusing to let myself be shut up. Up to a certain point they did not seem to trouble in the least about my wishes or about my chances and for a long time I was under the impression that I was their thing, that they did with me what they wanted. Later I understood that this was far from the case and a few words would have been enough to clarify everything.

Hardly had my face begun to heal, and I was able to chew a little food with my teeth, than I fell ill. I had a high fever and chronic diarrhoea. This period corresponded to the third full day marked by a notch on the oven bricks. Why did they keep me when I was so ill? It was certain that my illness would get the better of me. I was delirious and fell back into my initial torpor, and only came out of it to realize the state of ignominious filth in which I lay. None of this altered their routine: the old woman did not appear once during the day. And yet, with the little consciousness that remained to me, I looked forward to her appearance and beat with my fists and elbows on the walls of this damp narrow stinking tomb. The following day they tied me down hand and foot. One

of the men made me understand that he would gag me if I cried out. As on any other day the old woman did not come to see me. At night when they brought me out, covered with filth from head to foot, she washed me with warm water and, after wrapping me in a robe, gave me food and drink. That night someone stayed with me but I did not know who, and once again they took me back to the oven. They pointed to the rope as if to say: "Do you want that?" I was a little better and my belly no longer turned to water. I shook my head and went into my cell. The same evening I was strong enough to stretch three notches to make up for the lost days.

I was learning the harsh laws of life. Since they had rescued me I only used my eyes a few minutes each day, during the time they made me eat at night by the light of a candle. I had not the least idea where I was nor how they were dressed: I could half make out their faces and the rest was swallowed up in shadow, in which my weakened eyes could see nothing. As I heard very little noise coming from outside I was positive the house must be isolated, surrounded by gardens. Several times trucks passed in the distance and once a car stopped quite near. After a few moments an unaccustomed bustle came to me from the house. The lapse of time between the stopping of the car and the noise confirmed my opinion, and judging from the width of the room I had to cross I concluded it must be a large house.

My wound was linked with the memory of Clay and Ross. Hour after hour, twisting and turning on the bricks, I tried to imagine what had become of them. But the longer my loneliness lasted, while my wound healed, I gradually forgot those recent weeks and they receded much further into the past. It was all very fine explaining, making gestures in mime, I could not recover my pack or the book with the Korean vocabulary. For several days

I wore the robe the old woman had given me. My uniform had disappeared. One evening she made me put on white baggy trousers, narrow at the ankles. I was in shirt and trousers with my boots on when I first regained consciousness—the explosion must have blown the rest away, including the chain and identity disc I wore round my neck. Later, when they gave me back my garments washed and ironed, I found the matchbox with my watch. The night before my fever, as they did every evening after supper, they let me walk a few paces in the darkened room to get my circulation going. I took advantage of this to ask: “Koreans? Chinese? Japanese?”

They nodded their heads most at the word “Koreans.” I did not know how to ask them what side they were on. Perhaps they were Communists, as they had remained in Seoul, but if so why did they keep me? I enunciated as clearly as I could the name of each of the North and South leaders. They shook their heads and shrugged their shoulders. Then, as they did not seem to be taking me back to my room by force, I stood before them, bowed my head and, pointing to myself with my forefinger, repeated several times: “Joe Jewell.” Then I touched the old woman on her shoulder.

“And you?”

“Mossi,” she said. “Mossi.”

That was all for that night. Immediately after that the men leaped on me and put me to bed, while the two squatting women watched the scene with bared teeth. This was the moment I most expected them to deliver me up to the Communists, not from any treachery on their part, but because I could see no other solution to my position. One day they would come to the end of their patience and their efforts. They were risking their lives for a sick, surly foreigner about whom they understood nothing unless it were that his race had unleashed an atrocious war even

more blind and murderous than the thousand-year conflict to which they were used. I was embarrassed before them. In addition to my miseries I was ashamed of being what I was, of being American, white and civilized in front of these "savages" who, in the course of a few weeks had taught me how to live. It was only with the old woman when I was alone with her and she was looking after me, that this feeling disappeared, not because she had restored my self-confidence—on the contrary—but in her presence I found again the refuge and abandon that childhood seeks. She did for me what my mother had done, did it simply, because I was a wounded man who would die without the help of others. She washed me, took me in her arms, fed me and spoke to me in her tongue as one speaks to a child, because neither in myself nor in the toughness of men could I have found sufficient reason to go on living except hatred. The old woman ! That is what I called her until at last I learnt her real name—Tcha-Tou.

In the background were the other four. The old man must be her husband and the others perhaps her children, in any case the youngest two. The rather mature, small and shrivelled man might be her brother-in-law. The second woman, her daughter seemed young but had a flat head which for me lacked expression. Later on many things changed and I got to know everything about them and the meaning of their smallest gestures. At first they came to fetch me in my hole after they had finished their meal. I suppose the way I looked, my bewilderment and my sickness, compensated to some extent for the trouble I caused them. In spite of my stupor and the pain of my wound I was aware of the intense curiosity with which they analyzed my behaviour: they would gurgle and chatter volubly when I found myself halted in some gesture, or when I made my agitation look particularly ridiculous. Had I been able to see them distinctly and

examine them as they examined me at those evening meals --the only ones of the day for me—I should have avoided countless hours of rumination in my hole. But I could not see them, I was the spectacle, the candle was placed so that it only lit me. I sat on the ground with my legs outstretched and chest thrown forward and the old woman put a little food on the end of my fingers. Only later, very much later, after a lot of effort, did it all change, and when I had succeeded in drawing closer to them they stopped laughing at my mistakes.

I gave up making notches for the passing days. I used to lie on my back and run my finger over the row of notches I had made, but one day I lost the nail I scratched them with. In any case as I had no idea how long I should have to stay, there was no point in counting the days. And then I was getting used to it. Lying with eyes open in the darkness I tried to live, and I became aware of the poverty of my life. Left to my own devices I had nothing to catch on to ; I mustered all my memories, but every single one of them brought me nothing but regrets. I was poor, not because I had only a thousand memories behind me but because my past could give nothing to my future.

Sometimes I felt that reality was drawing near to me. I was about to seize it but it fled. Sometimes I doubted, doubted even that a man richer than myself could ever arrive at the goal and skirt the abyss. Having so few assets, the doubts which assailed me could not plunge me down from too great a height and in this respect my brutishness was a safeguard. All that was most primitive in me came to my defence. I thought of everything a man could think of when he takes himself as the focal point. I let all my images pass before my eyes. They lost their colours, went out, died of inanition. I was too detached to be afraid --perhaps I should be afraid again if I had to act. I was

under no illusion as to the value of the experience I was living through: my passiveness was of the same substance as the life I had led in the old days; the only difference was that I now realized it.

* * *

One morning I lay awake waiting for them to fetch me. The old woman, Tcha-Tou, had returned my trousers, shirt and boots, and I was lying there dressed, huddled in the robe she had left me for the night. The noise of their snoring and breathing disturbed me, then put me in a rage. I decided that from now on I would no longer accept their ways of going on. For some time I had been perpetually hungry and a great part of my dreams were of imaginary meals. Did they imagine one meal a day was enough for an American? Well, today it was going to change. I thought out what I would say, but when I had polished up my phrases I suddenly remembered they were useless and that I would have to make signs—point to my mouth and rub my belly. Anyway, they could be quite sure I wouldn't spend another fortnight on my oven nursing my empty belly! I had neither seen the sky nor had a breath of fresh air since they picked me up. I sat up and laced my boots. It was cold, so I crawled round the room on all fours. There was no communicating door, only a curtain made of some stuff which rustled as soon as you touched it; the room was bleak and empty, with no window. I felt the floor. The place where I slept was of boards and the rest just bare soil. I went round it again, glueing my ear to the walls, then stood up. Perhaps in the next room where they slept I should find something to eat. My rubber soles made no noise. In spite of my long stay in the dark my eyes could not make anything out. The curtain rustled softly and I stood between the two rooms. At last, by following their snoring, I managed

to locate their bodies. Two sounds of breathing came from above, so I concluded there must be another oven in this room. My impotence increased my bad temper. For days and days I had been there and I did not know the place. It was warmer in their room. I felt my way with one hand along the wall, came to a corner and turned it, and at this moment the idea entered my head to run away. If only I could find the door. I saw a red gleam at floor level: it was probably the oven. I stumbled against something soft—a sack. I felt it, squeezed it between my fingers; a fistful of rice trickled into my pocket. My heart began to beat, I was going to be free. Only one thing mattered, to get out of there. In any case nothing could have been worse. The sound of the sleepers rose about me as my right hand felt along the wall; there was a ridge, the door lintel. My legs refused to go forward. The noise of my beating heart would wake them up, but there would be no more lying in a hole for me and they could all go and f—— themselves. My jaw had grown strong again and I savoured how the rice would taste. It was all very simple: the sack of rice had been there for me to delve in and I had found the door because I had to leave. My fingers clasped the wooden latch which kept the door closed—I must have been weaker than I thought, for I was out of breath and saw spots in front of my eyes. I took out the wooden peg. One of the sleepers turned over, scratched himself, yawned and then began to breathe regularly again. The door squeaked. They would all leap on me: I dared not move. I saw the red gleam of the fire beneath the grille and at the same time the night sky full of black clouds. The door to the world lay open before me, the cold wind bit my hands and forehead. I had better shut the door, I could not leave it open like that for the wind would wake them up. Even the faint light hurt my eyes and I was forced to close them.

"I mustn't run . . . it's still wartime. Shall I never get out of it?" I knew nothing of them, except the familiar face of the old woman. "I mustn't look back, mustn't be able to say: 'That's the house.'" If the Communists tortured me I did not know whether I would admit everything or not. The fresh air intoxicated me. I walked and above my head a diffused light began to tinge the bellies of the clouds; it was dawn. My knees began to weaken before I had gone fifty steps. The ground rose to meet me, I protected my face with my elbow and something hard hit my chest, knocking the breath out of me. Drop by drop the blood trickled over my lips. I managed to get up on my elbows but fell back again. Once again my mouth hit the ground. I began to panic. With a final effort I managed to roll over on my side. From far away at the other end of the town came the purr of a motor. The noise drew nearer. I felt the dark sky weighing down on me and at times saw the gleam of the headlights on the clouds. A car was coming. Why not let myself go? I was no hero and I had no courage. I was at the end of my tether and I didn't want to go on struggling. Why did the old Korean woman Tcha-Tou bring me back to life? Why must you always pay your debts a thousandfold? It's so simple to cheat. Why did the flags always have to be so bright?

I was in the middle of the road and the car drew nearer. I could not get up for the road was all blown in. The car made its way slowly over the bumps, its lights rising and falling. They hadn't seen me yet. I clawed the ground with my fingers and began to climb. The car loomed larger—it was a truck. It would bounce a couple more times and then its headlights would pick me up. With a mighty effort I bunched my knees up under me and propelled myself forward. A hideous noise above me and the truck passed me by. The motor slowed down. Were

they coming back ? The brakes gave a shriek. They must not find me lying like a pig in a muddy street of Seoul. The truck had stopped. I managed to sit up and then dragged myself to a kind of barrier of planks, where I leant. Day broke slowly but I could hardly see any clearer than before. A hundred yards away I just made out the black back of the truck, a red tail light went out. One by one the soldiers jumped out—it was going to be very easy for them to capture me. Without a word, without a sound, they fell in beside the truck. I wanted to scream to break up their stiff file. Two shapes bustled around the motionless platoon, one of them carried an electric torch which flashed in all directions. They were armed with tommy-guns and I could see the slender lines of their barrels against the sky. There has always been something disturbing and fine about a soldier. Were they waiting for me to scream ? They split up into two ranks and their shapes crossed the street. They marched towards what seemed to be the house I had just left.

I was on my feet. It was not a garden that surrounded the house but ruins. A few walls were still standing, against which wooden huts had been built. Slowly they emerged through the dawn. Everywhere there were whole houses which had crumbled, in which men had dug new lairs. Out of this chaos rose a darker patch made of several cubes huddled together. It was there I had come from. The soldiers had surrounded it. No, it wasn't possible, I was wrong, it could no' have been that house—probably another one to the right or the left of it. On looking closer I could make out other cubes along the broken and tortured line of the road. Several rifle butts banged on the walls and doors while a soldier roared something or other. In a few seconds hundreds of heads would emerge from the debris and start to scream when they saw me. I managed to climb over the barrier. A

nail caught my trouser leg and I fell full length again. On the ground it was dark and I was like a blind man. Back there the soldiers all shouted at once and I heard women's voices screaming with terror. I hitched myself on to a pile of stones ; I could feel their polished surfaces and jagged edges. A stone slipped under my weight and I rolled backwards into a bush. Something moved, two eyes blinked into mine. It was a dog ; it watched me pick myself up, growling softly. Behind the pile of stones was a half tumbledown house ; the roof had been blown off and had fallen back like a hat on one side. I saw a hole and plunged into it, and for the first few seconds I thought I was on board ship, for the roof swayed and the whole house rocked, creaking on its beams. A few heavy jolts, I thought, and the thing would collapse.

It was now daylight. Without bothering about the rocking I went deeper in, trying to forget the soldiers' cries and the noise of the beams playing above my head. Suddenly I fell head first into a hole. It was not deep and I did not hurt myself. Feeling my way I realized it was a chimney ; I was once more in an oven, but this time inside. When I managed to turn round I found the grille and the stoking door. The house shook a few more times and somewhere there was a fall of debris. I nearly rushed out in anxiety, imagining myself buried in the avalanche I was going to bring about my ears, but nothing happened. Above me a white streak began to appear : it was daylight trickling through the holes in the roof. The house had a thirty degree list and I was bundled in one of the corners of the oven, bearing my weight on one shoulder and my heels. The cries of the soldiers grew louder. The top of the chimney which stuck out of the roof caught all the sounds—the clatter of rifles, falling planks and yelling voices. The Communists must be searching everywhere, going into each hut and each hole, driving out swarms

of people. Later I heard them round the house. One of them laughed and the "Kroa, kroa, tch, tch . . ." was punctuated with exclamations. The house began to sway again: at least two soldiers had come in at once. I felt giddy. The soldiers rushed out screaming and making the house rock even more dangerously, but another roared louder still and pushed them back in again. Every second I expected it to collapse and to get the two soldiers on top of me. The roof began to slide, exposing a great square sky. At last they left, the house came to rest, the cries disappeared in the distance and later I heard the truck make off. Then I filled my mouth with rice and deaf to everything, began to munch, letting my saliva soften the grains. It felt like gravel in my throat. The hours passed by. Some children came and played near the doorway. A woman ran up and shouted at them the way the soldiers had shouted. A little before the daylight began to fade a man with a rope came and hauled at the beams which stuck out of the house. He only left at nightfall, bearing away his booty. There were probably other noises, but I must have slept. In my gums, in the cracks of my wound, I felt the rice grains and was consumed with a violent thirst.

I looked up at the sky and breathed the fresh air. It was quite dark. What should I do? I was at my wits' end and I felt that the maniac with his rope had been trying to pull the house down. I had a broad chest and tough muscles, I played football I knew how to ride a horse bareback, how to drive a tractor and I could even handle a scythe, but would I be able to get out of that oven? And then where should I go? In trying to get up I dislodged some bricks, which grazed me as they fell. To what extent can you go on torturing yourself, getting up, lying down, getting up again? I had done it on the icy roads because there was a war on, but there was always

a war on, everywhere, and you couldn't escape it. Even in that oven there was a war on. The bricks, which had piled up at my feet, enabled me to catch on to the floor above. Gingerly I hitched myself up. From time to time my nails scratched against rough surfaces, the pain was enough to make me let go, but I persisted. The upper half of my body was clear, while my feet still hung in the chimney. I waited until I had got my breath back and for my strength to return. Through the hole of the door a sulphurous yellow haze hung over the town before taking its course southwards, where my own troops were marching.

The moonless night, devoid of all glow, drowned the wretched and sinister outlines of the ruins. I could not remember if I turned to the left or to the right. With outstretched arms I felt my way in the dark; from time to time my feet broke against icy surfaces and I stumbled into puddles and mud; once I got caught in some barbed wire which tore my ankles. Roaming about in the darkness I made out red gleams in one corner of the sky and I stopped and listened, trying to find out if they were still fighting, but I could hear nothing but the muffled noise of the town. I had the impression it was only an open tomb near which the living whispered. A shape bumped into me.

"Kroa, kroa, tch, tch . . ."

I stretched out my hand and tried to stop it, but it passed. I took a few more steps. Somewhere in the night people were talking, their voices seemed to come from the ground. Now the whole street was murmuring and I saw crouching forms blowing on tiny fires. How long could I wander without falling on one of these groups? I supposed they would kill me to avoid trouble and fling my body into some crumbling ruin. Several times I drew near to some dark hut. I wandered round it, looking for details which would remind me of the house I had left, but I

found nothing and wandered off. There were more and more dogs. The red gleam in the sky had grown larger ; at long intervals a tremor ran through the air and the red gleam grew more vivid. If one could die of despair I think that I should have died then. Once I sat down, clutched my legs and sobbed with my chin on my knees. I bit my lips, a little warmth trickled down my chest. I was finished. Voices began to whisper at my back. I was in the entrance of a doorway. They were in a circle round me ; suddenly I saw the whites of their eyes and felt the draught of a stick on my face. The blow caught me on the shoulder. I managed not to scream and started to run. There was a war on and you couldn't escape it. You'd better accept it and play your part . . . I walked towards the red sky. Once more I fell. It was the southern sky which was coming towards me: it would come with the monsoon. A line of silhouettes bore down on me. They grew gradually taller--like me they were blind and I could hear their sticks tapping on the frozen soil. Hands seized me by the hair and dragged me away. My feet were bound, arms took my chest, they leaned over me and then all was black.

* * *

I was awakened by the light. It fell directly on me and seemed to come from the ceiling. I felt they had put a dressing on my face again. At that moment I realized I was not cold and that something was wrapped round me. I moved my limbs beneath the coverlet. I was free. I leaned on an elbow and turned round ; to my left, six feet below, I saw the ground and immediately I felt giddy. I hardly had time to grasp the fact that I was lying on an oven before I found myself on the ground.

“ Mossi, Mossi . . . ”

I saw the edge of a dress and pattens with black soles.

" Mossi."

And then I saw the old woman for the first time in daylight. She raised the corners of her lips and her eyes smiled at me. I had returned. It was now my house. She called and her flat-faced daughter appeared. The two of them lifted me back to the oven and covered me up, and shortly afterwards they brought me something to eat. And that was how, half dreaming, half unconscious, I spent the first day of my return. That evening I was given more food and then went back into the little room—but now there was a mat on the floor and a coverlet which crinkled like paper. I slept a relaxed and dreamless sleep. No one came for me at dawn. I heard vaguely the three men get up and leave the house. Through the parted curtains I saw the light of day outlining the body of the old woman or her daughter. Something had changed. The memory of what I had lived through vanished. I was happier than I ever remembered having been. My disappearance at the moment when the Communists searched the quarter no doubt appeared to them providential, and they were bound to consider that a stranger capable of such a miracle might almost be intelligent. From that day on I was entirely free in their house and my life altered completely.

Little by little as the days passed Tcha-Tou and her daughter Tcha-Wou explained to me in mime, with a profusion of gestures and little cries, what their life was like and what it had been. It took me a long time to understand what they were trying to describe. To begin with they used symbols which for me were entirely meaningless; then they had recourse to more simple gestures which entered realms where we are all identical. Later they explained the symbols to me one by one, and thus their gestures were enriched and I at last understood everything they wanted to make clear. I became so used to it that I no longer realized we were strangers without a common

tongue, and in fact their little pantomimes enchanted me so much that I did not dream of learning even their most current words. I think this was also due to the impossibility I felt of giving them their equivalents in my own language. These two women created such beauty with their gestures, that I felt the tone sounds of my language to be indescribably coarse. From dawn to dusk I remained with the two women. Sometimes, when a neighbour came to see them or something unforeseen turned up, I went back to my hiding place over the oven. It took me far longer to get used to the men: neither they nor I could let ourselves go completely in our explanatory gestures, and in order to understand each other we had to fall back on the two women as interpreters. Furthermore, as men, we bore on our bodies the stigma of our nationalities, our prejudices and our politics. The men would not understand why I made no effort to learn their language. At all my attempts, despite my reasons for this refusal, only confused sounds came from my mouth. The elder man, Tcha-Tou's husband, taught me at last to repeat his name: Tien-Wien-Ling. But it never sounded as he wanted it, and I saw his eyes lose themselves in dreams in which I had no more significance for him than a flea on a pig's tail. Shortly after my return, when we were all together at supper, I noticed the men staring at me. Tcha-Tou explained to me later that they could not understand how such wisdom—by that they meant my opportune departure—could lurk behind such a childish face. This time I did all I could to confuse the old woman in my reply. One morning they removed my clothes and the men took them away. I got the impression that I was embarking on a path from which there was no return. Perhaps living is like that. All the men who died near me during our retreat lay frozen somewhere in their ugly attitudes of suffering until the spring winds returned them to the earth; and I

let my fighting uniform go because I had to live ; there was no halt for me because life would continue to strew haphazardly upon me its sweetness and its strength, its certainties and its fears. My life was from second to second. Why weep over the impossible ? It was not my will that made me live, neither was it the will of others that killed them. Having realized the powers which surround me my will was strong enough to make me adhere to them or reject them.

* * *

They poured hot water into a wooden copper. I stood naked in front of them. For a moment my shyness and my pride paralyzed me. I wanted to hide my genitals with my hand but I knew I must not complete the gesture. I was wounded and sick, I had returned from solitude and despair and I certainly had no cause to behave like a prude. I had nothing more to hide or to pretend about. I was as naked inside as out. My arms hung down beside my body, I was a little aware of its abnormal whiteness, and then I was freed of my thoughts. The old woman washed me. When I looked down I could see my ribs sticking out ; I had grown terribly thin and the flesh sagged along my thighs and arms. I was not ashamed of being naked : I was sad at being so ugly. Tcha-Wou returned, carrying a pile of clothes. I dried myself with a piece of linen while the two women spread out the clothes before me as at a bazaar. The whole thing seemed to me unreal. There were white trousers of different shapes, long linen shirts and dozens of sleeveless jackets of all colours—almond green, strawberry pink and cream. And there were peculiar frock coats with waxed black swallowtails.

“ Mossi.”

She brought me back to earth. I got dressed. A scarf served as belt for the trousers. I wanted to put on one

of the short vests, but the two women blew on their fingertips and gently shook their elbows. They were right: it was still winter. They handed me a long shirt and I took up the raspberry pink vest. It was so fine you might have thought it was a veil. Then they put me into a frock coat which fortunately had square tails. It was lined with beige-coloured wool. The war had left me with my khaki pants and my boots. They packed up the clothes again. I was alone in the middle of the room, fully clothed but bare-footed. Perhaps they had gone to find me some shoes. As long as they were not those kind of Korean wooden galoshes ! Yes, but supposing I couldn't get into them ? The youngest disappeared and came back with very thick white socks.

“ Mossi. Japan ! Japan ! ”

The big toe had a little pocket all to itself. I had never felt so comfortable in any clothes before.

The house must have been quite big but nothing much remained of it now. In style it was half Korean half Chinese. Mortar shells had completely destroyed the Chinese part, leaving only the out-buildings which were Korean. I think we were living in the kitchen and the room I slept in must have been the servants' room. The rest was very complicated. In the main room a door opened on to a small back garden which led into an alley, and another led into a long corridor at the end of which was the oven where I spent the first period ; a third door led into a little courtyard surrounded by walls where there was a nest of open fires to do the cooking. They had dug a hole at the foot of one of these walls through which they could enter the last intact room where they kept all they had managed to salvage, but later the roof of this room caved in, carrying away part of the outside wall. The room they lived in was quite large and opposite the street door stood an oven of brown polished bricks on

which two people could lie. Beside this they piled up what they could pick out of the rubble. Although they would never be able to use many of these objects again they seemed to be just as attached to them. Among other things there were a broken spade and a number of wicker baskets. Across the earthen floor of the room a tiled path traced its way from one door to the other, passing by the oven, and in another corner was a sunken basin of red bricks. There they had put all their kitchen utensils and during the day they drew a broken screen round it. The walls were of stone half way to the roof, topped with lath and plaster. A long window near the roof threw a square of light on to the oven which lit up the room. The door leading to the garden was always kept shut and in addition to the wooden cylinder which served as bolt there was an iron bar fastened over the door. I could walk from the room where I slept across the kitchen to the far end of the corridor, or else go out in the courtyard, but it was so tiny that I could hardly take three steps there. Or again I could lean against one of the walls or sit down on one of the little ovens and look at the sky.

Who were they ? Sometimes I thought they were the caretakers of the house, and the next moment that they were the owners. One day the old man put a nail under my nose, a long brand-new nail. As I seemed rather startled he made a gesture of sticking it into something. What followed was beyond me and I had to call Tcha-Tou. She and her daughter danced quite a ballet. Finally I understood that the old man made nails, and the other two as well. The old man found it extraordinary that I had not understood his mime. He opened his mouth, letting his pointed beard sag, put in the nail and then closed it ; with his hand he tugged at his beard, spat the nail out violently and began all over again. Tcha-Tou described in gesture a machine which swallowed, and then

with her fingers made a rain of nails gush out. Her daughter did the same thing by her side. Then the brother stood up and pretended to drag away a very heavy sack, and then came back to fetch another. It must have been a nail factory where they worked on the chain principle. The old man was the only one who remained morose. Later I examined their hands. They were calloused and hard but not from recent work.

* * *

I soon noticed that the two women made an effort to appear smiling and at ease with me but that their faces changed when they were alone or with the three men. For myself the ordeal of the oven and my day of liberty had brought me so near annihilation that I lived every second as if it were an inestimable boon. All the same I began to realize that things were becoming more and more difficult both for them and for myself. Something was happening which I only realized later, because as long as I remained with them my life never appeared to be detached from theirs. I had entered their circle. Not understanding their language and being unable to share their cares, the world for me stopped at the threshold of their house. Not once did I think of my own countrymen, of the States or of the army; not once did I have sufficient curiosity to find out what the town was like or what sort of life they led there. The great bustle of the outside world became quite meaningless to me. Other men perhaps might have tried to glean some useful information, or they would have gone out at night to kill marauding enemy soldiers, or again perhaps they would have tried to propagate their little patriotic visions: I did nothing like that and the idea never entered my head. From the moment I put on their clothes I was captivated by their charm and, without renouncing what I had been, let myself be impregnated

with all the poetry they wanted to offer me. This did not shut out the fact that each day that dawned was for me a reprieve and nothing more. In the midst of the torment I had discovered a haven of peace. I knew that it was ephemeral and did not correspond to the hope which had been born in me, but I should have been crazy to reject it on the pretext that it might be out of harmony with my general attempt to find a balance. The darkest hours of my life I had lived alone, clutching desperately on to my surroundings. There was no reason to refuse what luck had brought me. I had been freed from an entirely incomprehensible war, and I was certainly not going back to it. I had begun to slough my American skin and this was already a victory.

The day Tcha-Tou made me take a bath and gave me new clothes, and after I had explored all that remained of the house, she made me sit down in front of her. With a kind of pink chalk she drew figures on a sheet of paper, and each time she finished one turned the drawing round to me. When there was no room left on the page she went into a huddle with her daughter and kept pointing at me with her finger. Her eyes seemed to say: "It's true, these foreigners are even stupider than you'd think." It was inconceivable to her that I could not understand what the most innocent Chinese book-keeper would have understood at any spot throughout the immense Republic. It was after this that they began to put so much activity into their pantomime.

There was obviously no more electricity. When the men came home they lit a candle. One evening the last end guttered out and then there were only the gleams from the oven to light us. Every day the old man brought back some rice—ten or fifteen handfuls wrapped up in cornets on which were printed propaganda drawings. He tipped the rice into the sack, then gave the paper to his daughter

who immediately burnt it. Sometimes he brought back thin strips of meat wrapped up in a newspaper, but this became a rare occurrence. One day the sack of rice was empty. We had to drink warm water with a trace of tea in it. The following day, after locking me in over the oven, Tcha-Tou and her daughter left with the men. They came back in the afternoon and we had frost-bitten potatoes and turnips. Tcha-Tou explained that it was terrible for everyone, that the army people kept making speeches, that in the centre of the town one could go to the cinema free of charge but that the young folk if they wanted to eat had to join the North Korean Army and go far away. With her daughter she mimed a funeral. Night and day they buried those who died of hunger and cold, as well as those whom the soldiers murdered. To convey this to me the old woman pretended to shoot her daughter, who made it realistic enough by falling to the ground and pretending to be dead. I felt it all—all that happened beyond those walls. The war had not fled. Despite my longing winter had not made much progress ; it was not nearly so cold as in the mountains but much damper ; during the day a little warmth would soften the earth and everything was turned into a sea of mud, but there was no sign of spring—except in my heart. Sometimes a breeze, sweeping down from a far off peak, threw a blanket of snow over the wounded town, stifling the noises of the old capital. Sitting there, I felt it happening in the sky. The world was sad and the townspeople dragged themselves along in despair. Too many things which were alien to them crushed them inexorably and one by one their bodies descended into the earth. While American planes crossed the sky raining down flags and leaflets and Chinese gunners launched their fireworks, to right and left those who were for or against, just as those who took no sides, were shot impartially, were shot simply

because they were there and because death is a fine subject for laughter. Mothers laughed when their children, already cold, were taken from their backs, and no sooner was a new corpse found in the ruins than everybody burst out laughing. Convulsed, they went to find the father or the mother, unless the latter were already dead from laughter. And from time to time the gravediggers took out the leaves they stuffed up their nostrils to laugh more comfortably. This was really the most magnificent pleasure that the generous world of white men with their shells, grenades and power, could offer to their good friends who had a taste for death. Sometimes when night fell I climbed on to one of the ovens and looked out of the window. In the far distance I could make out the big buildings in the centre, with the circular dome of the Capitol. In spite of everything the town still lived. By the station the cranes chugged and one could hear the squeaking of their long arms. Somewhere engines shunted, coupling their trucks with a jolt, and sometimes I saw long grey columns of men returning from drill through the ruins. Once there was a procession. At its head a bugle band gaily played a funeral march. Behind it marched people with banners, then came a great coloured photograph and at last the crowd, dragging their feet. Perhaps this was their way of showing enthusiasm. The procession was controlled by policemen who, with their truncheons, beat against the walls to make the people come out. Tcha-Tou and her daughter caught hold of my feet and dragged me to the oven by force. A few minutes later the truncheons banged against the kitchen and the two women went out. I had never had such a strong feeling that a monstrous malady had descended upon mankind. There was such a sense of desolation among the people in the procession, such a feeling of impotence, that it seemed to me we were men

abandoned by God. At last I shook off this depression and life went on.

Sometimes, leaning on the top of the wall, I saw shapes ferreting about among the ruins, little white patches in the twilight. They hitched themselves to a beam and pulled : they bent double, gave a heave and out came a corpse or a handful of corpses which the dogs had smelled out. They searched for booty in the winter nights while the great flags hung limp and all the enemy bugles sounded waps. And all those who were no longer willing to chuckle let their tears flow, wrinkling up their flat yellow faces. Sometimes explosions shook the ground and made the houses rock. Once I was pushed into the corridor and there was hardly time to reach my oven before someone came into the kitchen. I tip-toed back to have a look. A woman, dressed in white and wearing a conical hat like a copper dome, was kneeling in the middle of the room. Tcha-Tou and her daughter both knelt opposite her. None of them spoke, but from time to time their shoulders shook and I saw tears flowing from their wide-open eyes. By the time the men returned the woman had gone. She left behind her a particular brand of sadness. Nobody made any gestures for my benefit that evening, and late into the night I heard them weeping.

* * *

I should have liked to give my life for them, but in what way could my life have been useful ? I had nothing to offer but my overflowing sentiments or my terrors. Why had they taken me in ? They didn't even know themselves. Tcha-Tou mimed for me how they had found me in a garden moving my arms and legs like a tortoise. All around me the Chinese were finishing off the American wounded. I was hidden against a wall and they had not yet seen me. Curiosity must have played a great part in

their decision to take me in—it was an adventure for them, and then I was a wounded man who seemed to be blind. I had been born of a woman and I was no longer an enemy, not even a foreigner, I was something that was going to die during the night. Whether I lived or died was of no importance—their feelings could not have been stirred—I was the traveller whom fate had led to their door. They picked me up for no other reason, without giving a thought to the possible embarrassment, danger or trouble.

During the day I tried to help the two women, but I could do nothing as their main occupation was to take care of me. As there was almost nothing to eat the dishes were very soon prepared. Once I wanted to wash the linen which the flat-faced daughter was scrubbing. Tcha-Tou pushed me away with her arm and swore at her daughter. The most tiring work was fetching water: the house well had collapsed and water had to be fetched from outside to fill the copper, which was also used as a bath.

I no longer noticed that Tcha-Wu had a flat face. She had a delicate body, very fine hands and although the whites of her eyes were veined with yellow her gaze was gentle. Sometimes in the afternoon she appeared in a wide, rather transparent white skirt attached to the shoulders by embroidered braces. Then we sat next to each other while Tcha-Tou explained to me the life they led in Korea. Each time I wanted to do the least chore she grabbed from my hands what I picked up. Although both of them were efficient at their tasks I got the impression that they had not worked before.

I had to explain to them who I was, what I did and why I had come so far from home, also what the woman was like who meant to me what Tcha-Tou meant to her daughter, and what my father did. The third man was the husband's brother. He was the unhappiest because he was

very short-sighted: all his glasses had been broken by the shelling and there were no more to be had in Seoul.

One evening the men brought back a huge sack. I had spent the afternoon watching the two women playing a game with a host of little ivory cubes; they built walls with them and their fingers flew to and fro like birds. That morning Tcha-Wou's brother had shaved me before leaving. The operation was appalling. It was a cut-throat razor but the blade was blunt and there was no soap. It appears that this was a great favour on the brother's part, for the razor was his most treasured possession. The presence of the women and feeling my cheeks well shaved had given me an appetite that made me almost giddy. The sight of the sack made my mouth water because it could not contain anything else but food. I don't know why, but at that moment I felt that when the three men were out of doors they must tell everybody about their American. I had not time to develop my theme before, in spite of my hunger, I was seized with an attack of nausea: the brother had just taken out of the sack by its tail, a huge Chinese dog with a slit in its throat. It hung the whole night in the kitchen. The following day Tcha-Tou enacted a ferocious hunting fable, from which I was made to understand that this was no ordinary dog, that it was better than pork and had nothing to do with the beasts that go "bow-wow" in the streets. The one in question had a black tongue in a black mouth with teeth which gleamed like rows of pearls. Tcha-Tou put a knife in my hand and pointed to the beast. Behind her Tcha-Wou delicately fluttered her eyelids. I noticed the slight trace of white powder with which she had dusted her smooth skin. The dog had a thick silky fur, brownish-violet in colour. For one moment it gave me a nostalgia for the open spaces, for happy cries and all the violent life which clamoured outside. I made a circular cut round one paw and then

opened up the hide to its belly and tail. They looked at me, surprised that I knew how to do it. I suddenly felt a need to talk to them: gestures no longer sufficed. I wanted to communicate with them with my lips, with my voice, with all that was tender in me. It was only later that I realized I had spoken in French, perhaps because they were women and that through them I was looking for my mother. I spoke at great length the whole time I stood there, gutting and preparing the animal. I went on talking to them while night turned the room dark and the two women, motionless and erect, watched my lips, trying by the sounds to plumb the very depths of me, while in the sky overhead passed the dull murderous voice of war. The men returned later that night. The dog, cut in pieces, was stewing in the courtyard. The old man brought back a new sack with candles, lard, flour and a yellowish spirit which tasted very unpleasant. It was a long time since I had seen so many things to eat. At the first mouthful I forgot it was dog. A hot rich gravy flowed in my mouth. I was among a group of human beings and by my side there was a woman: by turning my head a little I could make her out in the darkness. On my other side Tcha-Tou explained to the men what I had told her during the day. The old man, between two mouthfuls, stroking his straggly beard, seemed to say: "Our Long-nose seems to be making progress." Was it possible I was in Korea? By stretching out my hand I could caress the dog's pelt which had been left near the oven, and by leaning over I could brush against Tcha-Wou's body, whose quick breathing whistled softly in my ear.

For a long time I remained awake, watching the dying fire and listening to the gentle snoring which rose from their breasts.

Tcha-Wou bound the broken rod which kept the lantern open with a piece of thread. The shade was of boiled leather, to which had been stuck coloured oiled paper. It was shortly before the men were due to return. The old woman lit the candle and Tcha-Wou took the lamp by the ivory handle, which formed a bird's beak above the cube of light. Her mother accompanied us as far as the hole in the wall. The young girl leaned down and, passing the lamp through before her, disappeared. We were in the third room where they had stored their belongings. As it tumbled the roof had carried away a chunk of the wall, revealing a part of the old garden. Tcha-Wou whistled softly to me and I saw her lamp swaying like a faint star. It was not strong enough for me to get my bearings. Slowly the star drew quite close to me and I felt the warmth of her breath. Then her hand, clutching my clothes, sought mine. Her hand was as soft as a flower petal and lively as a little mouse.

"Tcha-Wou !"

She laughed and dragged me along with her. This was the first time I had been allowed to leave the house since they found me. The night was cold with a remote sky overhead. Above her I could see the dark outline of the huts and surrounding houses. We walked cautiously along the ruined wall whose debris reached to our knees. Several times shapes approached; then I shrank against the wall and she hid the light in the folds of her dress until they had passed.

It was the women who had decided that I must see the garden, or rather the little that remained of it which the men had been able to clear up at night. I felt tiling beneath my feet. We turned and Tcha-Wou came to a stop. A few yards away was a wall still intact and in front of it a little ornamental tree with bare branches. She leant down and let the light of the lamp sweep the ground at our feet.

I knelt beside her. Her fingers stroked some mauve moss which burst from a broken pot. She drew me to one side, took my hand and placed it on the smooth trunk of the dwarf tree, which glinted red in the lantern's yellow eye. We stood up. On a level with my head I saw a cage of thin golden wire.

"Kango-Sam," she said.

I touched the cage and repeated the name after her. Then she raised the lantern. The door of the cage had been torn out and a few blue downy feathers remained caught in the bars. She pushed the cage gently and it began to sway between us. Once more she took my hand and pointed it towards a far corner of the sky.

"Kango-Sam."

Was this the name of her bird? Behind us rose the dense mass of the town which on that side formed a rampart between the world and ourselves.

* * *

That evening two ageless women, an old man and a young one came to stay at the house. As we came through the hole and entered the corridor I heard unknown voices and stopped. She pushed me forward into the kitchen. One after another the newcomers bowed to me. From that evening onwards something new was established between the members of the two families. All the men left in the morning and I remained with the four women. There were now enough actors to give a complete ballet or explain the whole bible. When we were there alone the weight and misery of the life outside slowly disappeared. I felt that something was being prepared. At last Tcha-Tou explained to me that the young man had been betrothed to Tcha-Wou for a long time and that in spite of the war they were now going to be married. That was why they had all come to live together. Softly, like a heavy barque

which gets under way from the quayside, something seemed to leave me.

Tcha-Wou called the young man Piou. Now during the day my lips would suddenly stop smiling and my features harden. I began to avoid the young woman's eyes and to regret that she had crossed my path. One day the old man took me aside and showed me in the palm of his hand my watch without the glass and a few bills, money which I must have left in one of my pockets. Tcha-Wou explained to him—and besides, that was what he expected—that he could take it all to buy what was needed for the marriage.

The days passed and they were all very much alike. I do not know how they managed to keep the secret of my presence there. My nights had become painful and I dreamed. I often wanted to cry out and beg them not to get married. My lips were blue and ravaged by my teeth. At times the feeling of drunkenness and general defeatism which I knew during the retreat returned. Tcha-Wou went on just the same. She watched me and fluttered her eyelids, changed the colour of her blouses, but she did not take them off—she waited for the young man to come home. Sometimes she brushed against me, unleashing a boundless panic. However I was happy about one thing—not to have touched her, not to have taken her in my arms. I loved her and I knew it. In the old days I should have let my desire conquer me. It was perhaps the war and the suffering I had endured which had changed me so profoundly. I knew that I wanted to protect their love. In a world of noise and hatred I felt that what had happened to these two was something beautiful. It was the first time I had been confronted with the love of others and was able to understand it; it was perhaps by the doors they would soon be opening that I should be able to leave hell. But this did not prevent me suffering and

being always ready to succumb. I loved that woman. I do not know if she was beautiful or what she was like. Perhaps she was the one I had been looking for who passed me by. I was a stranger and I could not enter into their life. Tomorrow I should have to leave. The old dame, Tcha-Wou and the others—all I could do was to love them as they wished it and not as I wished. It was not because they had been kind to me that I struggled, that I destroyed everything that attracted me to her. It was life. I knew that if I weakened, if I tore the fragile tissue they were both weaving, if I quenched my sorrow on her lips, I should kill my hope and be in the vanguard of the knavish, ferocious and cruel war. We had all been too unhappy and too bruised for me to cheat.

After meals Tcha-Wou and Piou sat apart. They did not talk but simply held hands and looked at each other. Piou no longer left in the morning; he stayed the whole day with her. He was very handsome, of medium height and muscular. I had seen him bathing. His skin gleamed, his thighs were firm, his neck narrow and powerful. He was no longer my enemy, for I was under the spell of their love. I understood nothing of what they did or said. Sometimes my heart contracted and I should have liked to stretch out my arms to her, but I controlled my passion. I had just realized that Tcha-Wou was very near to me, much nearer than if I had known her body or kissed her lips. She was a woman and I had just discovered her humanity. What she had done for me she did simply, and I could only see the trouble I caused.

* * *

From my hiding place above the oven I heard nothing. The house and the town were like a silent tomb. Tcha-Wou, dressed in her everyday clothes, replaced the bricks behind me. I knew she had a special dress, but

perhaps she did not want me to see her dressed as a bride. I had been in my hiding place since mid-afternoon. People must be coming—the priests and merchants. Tcha-Tou and the old man squatted before me, making their apologies because the money was mine and I could not attend the wedding. Since my return I had lost all count of the days. For a while I thought I could spot Sundays, when the men stayed at home, but after a few calculations I found two Sundays in five days and then none at all. Nor had I any idea of the number of days that had passed since they first took me in. Sometimes the men came home with tense faces and whispered ceaselessly among themselves. I often thought it was because of me. Once the old man and his brother returned with their clothes torn and covered with mud. There were many things like that which had to remain unanswered. Tcha-Wou, before replacing the bricks, slipped me a little package. I took my time undoing it. It contained rings of pastry, which were sweet and sour at the same time. There were about ten of them on a little stick. Before she left I kissed her. I did not know if they kissed, but I knew that when they were unhappy, when they were going to die by the roadside they made the same gestures as we do to those who were going to leave them. They pressed them to their breasts and their lacquered eyes filled with the same despair. I kissed her behind the ear, on the spot where the hair is softest. Since the day we ate the dog I had not spoken but now I could not control myself.

“Tcha-Wou . . .”

I told her that I loved her, but quite differently to the way I should have said it that night in the garden. She laughed, made a little bow and then lifted up her long skirts and showed her ankles.

Many hours passed. Someone was moving the beams near my head. The hole grew larger and a candle appeared. It was Tcha-Tou. She beckoned to me to come out. The kitchen was in darkness. I could hear their breathing, the air was heavy with it, and then I made out the bodies curled up on the ground. I thought I should have been spending the night in my hiding place . . .

Tcha-Tou made me cross the room and stopped me in front of the curtain. As I did not know what to do she gave me a push. We went in and her candle lit up the little room feebly. My throat was dry; the light receded and then went out. Without a sound I slipped beneath the blanket. Near me breathed two bodies. Tcha-Wou was there, a few inches away, asleep or pretending to be asleep. The man stirred at her side. He had withdrawn his arm from beneath her neck, from her neck where the hair flowed in a black stream.

Did they realize I was there? It was cold, and lonely men are cold for they no longer wish to be lonely. A draught of cool air swept across the floor. I was afraid, much more afraid than of war. I should never be able to survive, bearing their mystery within me. Was I so weak that I could not bear too dark a sky, too bright a sky, the shadows of death or the bright gleams of love? What had I about me that soiled everything I touched? One day I would allow my body all the life in the world. Here was a spring idyll, deaf to the noise of gunfire, deaf to the groans of those who grovel in search of their graves. Love is brighter than the sprays of a napalm bomb, more ruthless than a tank, more powerful than any mass of steel that flies through the sky. It frightens you more than all the rest put together. We can die pierced by bullets, burned by fire, suffocated by earth—that is the domain of God—but we cannot watch a man draw near to a woman bereft of every veil. I wanted to cry out. War was less appal-

ling. Should I ever love again one day ?

* * *

I was woken up by a series of very near explosions. The ground groaned beneath my head and on all sides I heard plaster falling from the ceiling and walls. Suddenly the anti-aircraft guns growled and shrapnel began to fall with a whistle. Then we heard the whirr of several squadrons flying very low over the town. There was a series of sharp cracks, a noise like a soda siphon and everything turned green, precise and meticulous. I couldn't tell where the light entered but it lit up everything until the flare burnt out and died. Behind us, more distinctly than usual, we heard the throb of the nightly bombardment. Tcha-Wou and Piou had got up and they smiled at me. With the tip of her fingers she blew me a kiss—the sense of shame left me and I was free. The following morning I did not hear the men leave. When I went into the kitchen there was no one except the old woman and her daughter. Tcha-Wou was naked to the waist and her mother stood behind her plaiting her black hair. The young woman was sitting cross-legged and her little firm breasts gleamed in the light. The women gave no sign of being disturbed by my presence. Her mother finished plaiting her hair, swathed her breasts in a cotton band and put on her ash-coloured blouse. After this she brought us the remainder of yesterday's feast in wooden bowls. When we had eaten Tcha-Wou made me climb on to the oven, from where we could see a part of the horizon. With one hand she drew a tall mountain which she put very far way, in the direction where our retreat had begun.

"Kango-Sam," she said, and without waiting she turned her head, showing her ear where I had kissed her.

"Tcha-Wou, my little sister . . ."

During the afternoon when Piou's mother and aunt came

in they brought with them American propaganda leaflets and a packet of cigarettes. Then Tcha-Wou showed me the blouse she had received as a wedding present, a mirror with an ebony frame and a little white teapot.

I began to tell them about the war, about the great steel ships loaded with little white men who sailed wave after wave to the Far East. I told them of the great barracks where the few tender feelings one bears are broken and trampled underfoot. And I told them how love was unknown to us and how scared we were. The four women watched me and I must have been a comic sight in my wide-sleeved jacket and my dancer's trousers, raising my feet in my Japanese stockings. Piou came back with the other men. From one pocket he drew a violet flower with black spots on a long hairy stalk, and from another a little wooden cage in which hopped a golden brown bird as big as a thumb. From his European vest he brought out a wild beast's tooth.

"Tiger," he said. "Tiger for you."

The following day we saw the first blue patches in the sky and at last, towards midday, the sun burst through. Overhead a cloud in the form of a dragon dragged its tail along, like the one printed on Cincinnati's matchbox. Perhaps he would have liked to be there standing next to Tcha-Wou, and perhaps he would have known better than I how to sing, how to evoke the splendour of life. Then I thought of the others. My body wanted to live, it was already growing restless. The wound on my chin had healed. While I looked up in the air Tcha-Wou took my hand and ran it over her belly.

"Have you any children?" was what she wanted to know.

I climbed on to one of the courtyard ovens. In the street folk in black and white with pointed hats or bowlers were passing by. Behind a coffin, borne by three men,

walked an old Korean who looked like our old man. The coffin, hidden by dog skins hung on wires whose hair the fresh sea breeze ruffled, passed and disappeared. Far away on the southern horizon the guns growled a little louder.

* * *

I had begun to mark each evening on the bricks above my forehead. Four or five times the Communists came to search the place while requisitioning, emptying the kitchen little by little. The last time they discovered the third room. They broke down the wall and took away everything they found. There were only four of us left—the old woman, her husband, his brother and myself—for all the others had gone. Tcha-Wou, her husband and his brother were the first to leave.

For several days the young people had remained shut up like me. They knew that the Communists were arresting all the young people to carry them off to the north. One evening they came and said goodbye to me: I had guessed they were getting ready to leave. The family chose warm clothing for them and then the rice and dried meat were shared out. Tcha-Wou was dressed as a man, with trousers and a black belt fastening her blouse. Over all she had put a shirt with green stripes, while from her breasts to her knees she had wrapped herself in a dark blanket whose fringes formed lozenges. From a distance she looked like a boy. For an instant I saw her rather flat face which, innocent of wrinkles, seemed like a cold mask. Round her head she had knotted a white scarf hiding the bun of her hair at the back. Once more I saw her little restless hands with the broken nails: she wore a silver ring on the left hand. The old woman helped her load a bundle on her head, then one by one they filed past me. Behind came the mother and Piou's aunt, weeping. Tcha-Wou came out last. For a second she was at my side and then the

night swallowed her up. We stopped on the threshold until the sound of their footsteps disappeared. I did not dare to look at those who remained behind and I went to sleep in the little room.

From that day, as during the retreat, we stumbled on into a boundless tragedy. It had stopped freezing and once the old man brought back a few blades of grass, supple and green as tiny swords. Day after day the noise of gunfire drew nearer, but sometimes to tease us it decreased. We sat on the floor in silence. Then I understood how little our people cared for all the promises they broadcast so loudly. The people of this country meant nothing at all: for our army it was merely a military exercise, an experiment where our brutality could be given free reign, hiding behind a claim that the Koreans had no feelings and could put up with anything. All in good time American power and heroism would come to raise their flags on the graveyard the town was doomed to become. During the day we saw columns of civilians splashing through fields of ruins on their way to the north. Tcha-Tou no longer felt in a mood for mime. I watched her age. I should have to leave. The old man and his brother no longer worked but ran about all day trying to exchange for food anything that had escaped the Communists. Once they stayed away for two days waiting in a queue for rice Tcha-Tou explained to me that they lacked a certain paper and because of it were unable to get any. One evening they boiled up a few roots they had torn from the trees in their garden.

I began to have fits of giddiness which left me in such a state of anxiety that I had to lie down and clutch my shivering limbs. It was too late, I no longer had the strength to leave. Then the noise of battle began to draw closer again. Planes of all descriptions flew ceaselessly across the sky, and one night the spring wind brought the

first storm of war to the town. They were fighting along the whole length of the Han River. Hour after hour the guns fired, then the mortars and the light weapons fell silent, leaving furious waves of heavy shells to clatter towards the town. Night after night, day after day, the not far distant guns raised the soil like an earthquake. Piou's mother, his aunt and the other man fled one morning, leaving us an enamel basin and a little rotten fish wrapped up in a maize leaf. Since the previous night the salvoes had straddled the quarter. We felt the shells were seeking out the house. From the centre of the town rose the din of five and six storey buildings disintegrating, crumbling one on the other. The old woman and the two men were forced to take refuge in fox-holes in the ruins, and I had to return to my place above the oven. They only came back at night when the land batteries fell silent, leaving the warships to continue their bombardment of the Communist positions west of Seoul.

Once a shell gutted a depot and brought to light a few sacks of grain. Before the police could intervene the people took everything they could find in spite of the bombardment, and on this we subsisted. Once (it was not yet daylight and the old folk hadn't yet left) the first tracer shells fell near the house, filling it with dust and smoke. Then, lying in the darkness, I counted each shot, calculating the direction and the range. Tcha-Tou begged me not to go out. People would be furious and ready to panic, and my presence must not be suspected. The house had no chance of escaping a hit: a burst caught the outside wall and once a chunk of steel as big as a soup plate broke the window and ricocheted across the kitchen into the corridor. One evening Tcha-Tou and her husband returned home without the other man: he had been crushed while searching a house, a beam had flattened him like a fly. Under his body they found a sack of slightly mouldy

barley. There was no more water, for the nearby wells had been choked with rubble. Tcha-Tou went with a tin from puddle to puddle to fill the pail. Since the bombardment I had not been able to wash; my face was covered with a stiff beard and I felt as if I were someone different. We no longer had any light—if I had seen a candle I should have eaten it. My pretty jacket was in ribbons, it stuck to my shirt which in turn stuck to my skin.

All three of us squatted on our heels in front of the oven door. We had not even bothered to boil the barley. The grains crackled deliciously between my teeth, it was a luxury simply to chew them as they were. The sack lay at our feet and we cherished our treasure. Once more I lost what I had found. I had become an animal again. The magnificent life of men was only a mirage. My belly was an immense black pocket which I must fill and refill without stopping. Against me I could feel the dry bony thighs of the old man. His beard was ragged, there were only a few straggling hairs on his chin; his long gnarled fingers kneaded a handful of grain. Without a break the earth trembled under us and the bellowing flames licked the sky. The fine war, the great war. That was it !

We were lifted up. The blast hurled us against the wall and then back on the ground. I was glad Tcha-Wou had gone, glad she couldn't see me. My face was bleeding again. I should have liked to be able to say: "I love you." There were hosts of us who would never know any love. Our life was war. Where was she ? Was she trotting along somewhere, slipping between the trees or sleeping near a fire with Piou at her side ? Simply to love. But there was too much noise for anyone to hear our cries.

The explosion tore off the door. The old couple were lying next to me, breathing heavily. With difficulty I dragged myself to the corner of sky which had appeared in the wall. That evening I had cut the seventeenth notch

since the beginning of the bombardment. The air was warm and smelt of spring and the sea. A great pattern of stars gleamed in the sky. I went out and the soil was soft and springy ; it had finished drinking up the snows of winter. All around us the town was ablaze. In front the flames lit up a high wall and through the broken windows they looked like pointed teeth. One might have thought they were giant fireworks. From the river came a dull growl. Softly a fog blotted out the stars and sank upon us. There were still several hours before dawn. The old woman, who was now very very old, wept by my side. I knew that we couldn't go on, knew that we were finished, that they had suffered too long on my behalf. Somewhere a gigantic machine had attacked the town. A procession glided past us—it was on the road to the north ; in the fog we could make out trucks and the pale eyes of their headlights. In front of the line of trucks human forms moved about. We saw bundles on their heads and backs.

Tcha-Tou called her husband. They had a discussion and the old man disappeared. One had to take advantage of the lull to get some sleep. We no longer had mats or blankets. The ceiling of the little room had fallen in and I slept with them in the kitchen. Tomorrow would be time enough for everything.

* * *

The old woman took me by the hand and guided me. On the other side her husband trotted along, clutching on to me and holding me back. The sun was not strong, it was my eyes that were too weak. I stopped, felt about with my hands for something to sit on ; when my heart stopped beating so furiously we would set out again. The sun caressed me, warming my face, my hands and my thighs ; its heat penetrated my clothes and reached to my skin. People passed and then others, and still more. Some

of them were running. We didn't have to run. It was life itself which was coming towards us. I opened my eyes, they no longer hurt and I could see. I felt as if I had grown taller, but that was probably because we were on completely razed ground and could stand fully erect. Three or four hundred yards away was a heap of rubble—the beginning of the town. I looked back to see the house but could not find it in the shattered landscape. The old Korean took me by the shoulder and we were on the march again. From every hole, from broken huts, from ruins, swarmed droves of people. Nothing but women, old men and a few children. We came to a street. In places there was still a little asphalt and bits of pavement, and even a few walls stood between the concrete columns. The sky was blue. You would have thought a periwinkle had opened its petals. I wanted to walk quicker, pass them all, brush them aside. No one could have been happier. Just then I noticed my hand. The skin was greenish white, but that didn't matter. Then came the noise of the first truck. It must be just round the corner. An American truck from my country—God, how I loved my country ! We turned and were nearing the centre. The old woman clutched my hand tightly. Despite the fury of the shells the big houses still showed their facades, perpetuating the aspect of a great modern town. At the end of the street we could see the dome of the Capitol, towards which ran telegraph poles with wires dangling from the insulators. The legs of a table stuck out of a third floor window with the stars and stripes attached. I pushed forward, dragging the old woman and her husband along. A tank had just run off the pavement and its treads sucked up the asphalt. I waved my arms but it passed without seeing me. Behind it filed several jeeps. They were also going too fast. They were going too fast and I was getting giddy. We reached the head of the crowd. There was a cordon of American

troops. I stood fascinated by the first face, a white, well-fed, clean-shaven face. He wore his helmet on the back of his head. A car stopped and men got out. There was a photographer and a guy writing.

Had I ever done anything to be an American? No. But I was happy because they were going to take me away, grab me away from this crowd. I was going to take the old woman and her husband with me. But the others, with their gaping mouths and devouring eyes—that was all over.

“It’s me, it’s me,” I cried.

What was eating them? They looked at me as if I were crazy.

“It’s me. I’m American. Well, doesn’t that mean anything to you? These two saved my life, see!”

As I spoke I grabbed the lieutenant by the sling of his rifle. I saw the huge patch of his M.P. badge.

“Can’t you see who I am?”

It was then they started to beat me up—round the head with the butts of their weapons, and when I was down anywhere with their heels. Towering above me, they yelled: “F——g Red bastard! Lousy dog!”

They yelled in American. I had to laugh. They leant over and there was a sergeant-major with the lieutenant. They thought they had made me bleed like that: under my beard they hadn’t seen that my old wound had opened. I bled every day . . . the whole time . . . and it would never stop. I looked at them calmly. I could see the old woman too. She was quite tall when seen from the ground. They didn’t know that I had forgotten how to speak, nor could they see how rich I was, how much land, how many tractors, fields and men I had working there—all of which would belong to me when my father died. They couldn’t see that, either in my eyes or on my body. Word by word I prepared a phrase in my mouth before letting it go.

“ You’re a fine bunch of bastards, help these two old folks ! ”

“ Gee, he’s an American.”

They laid me on the pavement and someone knelt beside me. They cut open my sleeve with scissors, but I did not feel the needle. Above my head I saw bubbles of air rising in an ampoule, which the depths of the sky tinged with blue, and later I knew I should live again and win through.

PART THREE

BEHIND THE LINE

THEY glided noiselessly over the gleaming floors. They were proud of the efficiency they had attained in the Seventh Field Hospital at Pusan. In the eyes of the Koreans who trundled their wet mops over the brown floor could be read the pride at belonging to such a fine organization. The chairs we were wheeled about in and the food trolleys moved in an unreal fashion through a soft and silky dream. The orderlies, the nurses and the doctors, they too had little wings on their ankles and flitted silently through the wards without touching the floor. Only the nurse on the second floor, a big woman whose breasts you could almost weigh as she bent over you, made a noise as she walked. She had squeaky shoes. "Creak-creak," and we knew it was her.

Above the door was nailed a placard: *The finest surgeons in the world operate here.*

Apart from this optimistic notice and the noise of Lieutenant Edith Conner's shoes there was nothing human in that hospital. It was a mechanical repair shop and functioned like one. As soon as one of our maladies refused to respond to the standard treatment we felt at once that we were undesirables. I do not want to suggest that the doctors were monsters, but they were unequipped for war and they too were scared. The cleanliness, the sterilization, the efficiency were the bulwarks they had raised against it. People died there just as they did in the other military hospitals, but their system had one advantage: as soon as a wounded man recovered he used all his strength to get fit so as to be rid of this paradise. Hardly had he regained consciousness than the most obtuse, the most stupid of them realized that all this silent bustle was merely a huge bluff. But we were so used to

show and ballyhoo that once this first impression passed we readapted ourselves to this world of chromium-plated machines. Those who were in a bad way clutched desperately to the imposing medical display: their glazed eyes stared at the taps, oxygen cylinders, the sterilized instruments, the manometers and the impressive panoply of their latest religion, then they died all alone and their cards were torn up while the doctors, imprisoned in their white armour, looked at them, and because they felt powerless dared not bend down and show any sympathy. All round people died like dogs on white sheets next to useless apparatus which for once carried out its sterile promise. I suffered and screamed for relief. I was tortured and my complaint was suppressed. Twice I was taken away to die somewhere else, and then at last I felt my spirit return. I was still very ill but had regained consciousness. They were too kind to me. My case was unique: I had brought back with me nearly every disease, every type of vermin and every type of unknown virus. They seethed in my body with the dozens of drugs with which I was constantly injected. For days and days I sailed on the threshold of coma, crossed it only to return. I could not make myself understood but I felt that all these mixtures were futile. The only thing I wanted from them was a glance, but that I never got. Each time death took one of us they felt they were responsible; they wanted to make us believe that they held the secret of life and death.

One day I opened my eyes and realized that I was looking at heaven on earth. The chief medico was waiting for this moment to find out if I were really Joe Jewell, the son of C. R. A. Jewell. If so I had the right to extra treatment, and that same evening I wandered once more in the milky haze of coma. When I opened my eyes again the big noise was still there. I had to swear to him that I was not an

officer. He wanted to put me in another ward, as if that could have made the least difference. He came from south of Chicago and knew my father. It was useless my protesting, they simply would not leave me in peace. The other cases in the ward recovered their taste for life merely by the distraction my treatment offered. The fact that this doctor and my father had been buddies got me a flood of telegrams—my father forgave me and said he could get me home within fifteen days. After which there was an inquiry. Intelligence officers came specially from Tokyo so that I could tell them in person what I had seen and done. Fortunately they were received by the chief medico who gave them a clue as to how important my family was, or else I don't think they'd have waited for me to get on my feet before they shot me. They couldn't get it into their heads that I had seen nothing and done nothing. Furthermore, in my record they found my refusal to take the officer's course. That I was the son of my father only aggravated this refusal on my part. Without the aid of the doctor the officers could have had me on the score that I was shooting the bull. Every morning about nine o'clock I was helped into a dressing gown and felt slippers and wheeled to the office, where they sat waiting for me smoking.

"Were you seriously wounded when you were hit?"

"I passed out, sir."

"Why didn't you rejoin your unit? You knew you'd have been picked up."

It was no use my looking at them dumbfounded, they did not stop questioning me.

"What did you do between the 3rd January and the 14th March?"

I was very surprised to learn that I had spent sixty-one days in hiding.

"There must be a few little things you got to know.

Did you see the Communists ? What were they doing ? Didn't they try to influence you ? ”

“ And those gooks—the Tien-Wien-Lings ? ”

Then I began my story again, trying to make it comprehensible. I told them everything except what concerned Tcha-Wou. One day they read me the report of the lieutenant who looked after me in Seoul, and that way I learned that the army had clothed the old woman and her husband and given them provisions, although it was contrary to regulations. At the end of the seventh interrogation I managed to get on my feet and I told them in the calmest voice in the world that they made me shit, that they could go back to Tokyo and kiss their generals' and their women's arses, that once more they gave me the screaming shits, but that my father's sister-in-law was married to the brother of the President of the Senate House Commission. The G.I. who took it down in shorthand nearly burst trying not to laugh. The three officers stood up. In their wildest dreams they could not have imagined such a thing happening to them. Of military life and war they knew nothing except the salutes they received in the street and the peaceful atmosphere of their offices. I was half in their hands, they had the power to make a soldier talk, but there were several things in my favour: the men loathed them and they knew it, and they also knew that there was no baseness they would not commit to preserve their cushy life far away from the line. And above all my case was too isolated. If I had breathed the least word of mass discontent they would have gone further, but it was I as an individual who had attacked them. They left the same evening and I never heard another word from them.

Once more the wound on my cheek closed up, leaving only an angry scar. I put on weight and strength. I could go home. It would have been very easy for my father

to fix it. At certain moments I made up my mind: I had had enough, too many: problems rose up at once, the simplest thing was to scrap them all and take the ship back. I was not cut out for this struggle. I thought I had grasped something, but that also was too personal a matter. It was the whole world that had to change. My little, solitary rebellion had no future and I got frightened. I wanted to go back to my room, to dig myself in and live there with closed eyes, with my ears stuffed up, until the world swallowed me.

I did not know what to do or who to turn to. I missed the time in the mountains where everything was so much easier: we had shed so much up there. I wanted to leave, to run away from the army. I couldn't stand it any longer. Before the war I never had many contacts, never suffered at the hands of men, but now I knew how hard the world was, and I hadn't the courage to rebel. The only thing I wanted to do was to flee. One little word and I should be on the other side. I should lose my self-respect, and then. . . . There were so few men who were not ashamed of themselves, who knew how to live without renouncing life itself. I should only be one more of them. I knew exactly what was expected of me; I had been brought up to it, so why look for anything else?

* * *

On the ceiling were three blue lamps which lit up the ward. The beds were arranged against the wall, ten to each side. Through the glass door which led to the corridor I could see the next ward. A group dressed in white were wheeling a bed. Once they had gone the lights were put out. Behind my head I heard the fine rain beating against the window pane. Yesterday I tore up the letter I had written to my father. Maybe it was dumb of me, but I would wait until my regiment was sent back to the

States. Most of the men were snoring. Some of them groaned and others talked in their sleep: it took time to get used to it. In a few days I should be discharged, then where would they send me? My father's friend wanted me to go to Japan. The reason I refused to go home was so as to remain in Korea: I wouldn't write a single word to my father, there was nothing to explain. Perhaps I should find Clay and Ross, but I shouldn't make an effort. The night was very dark. If you listened carefully you could hear the ships' sirens in the harbour. The war was very far away, but it had not stopped. It hit the dark mass of the hospital without let-up. A strip of light fell on the placard above the door, but the wounded lying in their ambulances could not see it. Someone glided through the ward, stopping at each bed. Now and then a beam of light picked out a face. I was lying very high on my pillows, the torch had gone out and I saw a form drawing near my bed. It was big Conner. She switched on her torch to light me up.

"You're not asleep? Look," she said, lighting up her feet, "I've got new shoes. The old ones squeaked."

The guy in the next bed murmured to himself: "Ah, come, come!" He shook his head in his sleep, his hands crumpled the sheet under his chin. "Ah, let me, darling . . ." His mouth quivered.

"He's happy enough," she said, "he's dreaming. Good-night."

Was it raining all over Korea? Spring had come at last. So many things would be changed I shouldn't recognize the place, neither the fields, the warm air nor the new trees. Apparently it was early for the rains, but this year everything was abnormal.

"Ah, ah! . . ."

The guy in the next bed woke up.

"This bastard leg hurts me right up my back. Say

buddy, give us a hand."

He groaned and bit his fingers.

"You want me to get the sister?"

"No. I want them to bloody well leave me in peace. I dreamt I was home. You're getting the hell out of here, you lucky son of a bitch!"

I felt between the sheets and my fingers brushed against the plasters. I dared not touch his huge, hard, warm legs.

"Well, make it snappy."

I couldn't find it.

"Ah, that's it," he said.

We heard the liquid trickling into the bottle. He had finished, and I drew up the blankets to make him comfortable. He closed his eyes.

"It hurts," he said, "it hurts . . ."

His cries grew louder, stifling the others.

"Aw, shut your trap."

"It hurts . . ."

He opened his eyes. Clumsily I wiped the sweat from his forehead. The light went on in the other room. Another group in white took away a body.

"I'm not going to die, am I?" he said.

Big Conner came back.

"Your shoes don't make any noise now," said the wounded man. "It was better before. Ah, the bastards, the bastards!"

In the distance another man began to groan, grinding his teeth. From the other side of my bed rose the sweet sticky odour of pus, which towards dawn always percolates through the gauze dressings. It was high time I left. Shrieks broke loose on the first floor—some hideous agony which made you clench your teeth and made your blood gush into the pails. Someone was going to die before day-break. Someone who no longer had the strength to fight, someone no longer willing to recognize his body in the

shapeless mass which war had left to him.

* * *

"Sign here."

I signed. The captain read the pay sheet, got up and, running the tip of his tongue over his lips, went to a safe at the far end of the office.

"Well, soldier," he said, "so you're getting your dough ? "

He began to fumble in a bag.

"What'll you do with all that in Chinju ? "

"I'll have to see, sir."

He shut the safe and, with a wriggle of his buttocks, returned to his chair. Then he spread out the notes, one by one, in front of me.

"Two hundred and twenty dollars. I've never handed out so much money to a G.I. before."

He was seized with doubt, scanned my pay sheet once more and read out in a low voice: "One month's combat, sixty-one days' captivity, one month in hospital. That's it. Are you going to send it home ? "

"No."

"What are you going to do with it ? "

I took the stack of notes and put them in my pocket.

"I know where there's some Japanese brandy to be had," he said with a grin. His eyes lit up. "And one or two little broads. Doesn't that tempt you ? "

I did not answer. He stood up and shook his finger at me

"You know you haven't the right to leave here, you haven't the right to go to Pusan ? But if you play ball I'll take you to Pusan."

"No thanks," I said. "I'm tired. But if I could get hold of some hootch . . ."

He sat down again with his elbows on the table, and

began to drum with the tips of his fingers.

"It might cost a bit," he said.

I took out my wad and put two twenty dollar bills down on the table.

"Come back tomorrow," he said. "Have you any other money?"

"Why?"

"If you like I could lay on a trip to Tokyo for you."

I took out a ten spot and showed it to him.

"The hootch—today!"

He blinked his eyelids and pocketed the three notes. But I hadn't gone two steps outside before I felt like going back and giving him everything I had to get the stuff immediately.

In front of the medico's office I found a queue of men in jeans waiting for the afternoon visit.

"Where are you from?" asked the guy in front of me.

"From Pusan."

"Been here long?"

"Two hours."

He gave a laugh.

"You ain't seen nothing yet. At Pusan they refused to send me back to my regiment. They didn't know where it was!"

"Have you been here long?" I asked him

"Two weeks," he said without looking round.

"How come?"

He turned round. There was a look of surprise in his eyes.

"What were you doing in Pusan?"

"In hospital."

"And before that?"

"Up north."

"Well, it's a sight worse here," he said. "You'll regret your old man ever rode your mother. They'll make you

shit here."

His mouth filled with saliva and he spat it out against the wall with disgust.

"Yes, make you shit. They're breaking the army in."

He put his face close to mine.

"They're nuts," he said "They're scared stiff of the Reds. They see them everywhere. It makes you want to take a powder."

He stared at me for a moment

"Maybe I've spoken out of turn. With a mug like yours—you're not an officer that's been reduced, are you?"

"No."

One by one the men disappeared through the door and the queue grew smaller. It was my turn. Someone bawled: "Next!" I pushed open the door and found myself face to face with a little man in a tight white tunic with his lieutenant's bar pinned on the shoulder. He had a big nose, deep-set eyes, a half-open mouth in which you could see a gold tooth.

"Well, don't you stand to attention in the presence of an officer?" he hissed.

I drew in my stomach and clicked my heels. With his hands behind his back the man walked round me a couple of times, pinching his nostrils, a grimace of disgust on his lips.

"Don't you know that for visits you dress in jeans?"

"No sir. I've only just arrived."

"Reporting sick already?"

"No, sir. They told me to report to you for examination."

"Who's they?"

I began to grow hot under the collar.

"Well, who's *they*? Haven't *they* got a rank?"

"Yes, sir—a G.I. first class at the gate, then the Chief Sergeant of Personnel and the Paymaster Captain."

"Your papers."

I handed him my sheets which he scanned and then looked at my chest.

"You've been wounded?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, where's your wound stripe?"

"I thought you only wore it on Sundays."

"Decorations are always worn on uniform for pass. Go and get changed at the clothing store."

"But they won't give me any clothes until you've examined me, sir."

He laughed.

"About turn. Scram!"

* * *

"Did you see the medico?" asked the sergeant, holding out his hand for my sheet.

"He wouldn't see me in this rig."

"He has that right," said the sergeant.

Without paying more attention to me he went back to his army newspaper. It was an enormous shed with a counter just inside, in front of a wall which hid the general shop. From behind the wall came a sound of half-hearted activity. The air smelt of wool, new leather and cardboard. At the sergeant's feet were bottles and a box of chocolates. He must have been about forty; he had a coarse face with pink skin like the arse of a little pig. I turned about. Through the open door I could see the parade ground surrounded by wooden huts. To the right of the entrance gate with its barbed wire was a placard: *The Commandant of the Chinju Training Centre greets you.*

That morning during the journey the weather had been fine, now a bank of clouds coming from the east was making for us. A fly hit my cheek, disappeared and came back buzzing. It was hot. The buzzing of the fly reminded me

of hot summers back in the States. The sergeant turned over the pages of his newspaper.

"You still here?" he said with a drawl.

I turned back and went to the counter. All I wanted was to get through without any trouble to the evening—to my hootch.

The sergeant shook his head.

"No dice," he said, "without a chit from the medico I can't give you anything"

I stuffed my hand in my pocket and brought out my wad of notes.

The man's neck stretched out to see better.

"Where did you scrounge that?"

"Are you going to rig me out?"

"Yes, yes, of course. I was only kidding. Come on, stir it up, you sons of bitches," he roared.

Footsteps pattered behind the wall and a kind of monkey disguised as a G.I. appeared.

"A complete outfit for the guy. And don't balls it up."

Above the sergeant's head on a panel were nailed all the clothes and linen one had a right to.

"Your size?" asked the monkey.

The sergeant measured me up with his eye.

"Fifteen—seventeen—nine."

Then he smiled at me and rubbed his hands.

"You betcha I've got a good eye," he said.

The monkey disappeared and began to move the boxes about. The sergeant's eyes fell on my wad of notes. With one hand he opened a drawer and brought out six forms. He took a fountain pen out of his shirt pocket and, still looking at me, began to strike out and make notes on the paper.

"You ought to be filling these up," he said.

"What do you do with dough in Chinju?" I asked him.

He stopped writing, thinking I was going to pike. He

didn't know if he ought to begin to bawl me out, for he saw I was full of it.

"You wouldn't do that to me?" he said.

I took out a twenty dollar bill and handed it to him.

"Thanks," he said.

"What do you do with them?" I asked again.

"I send them to the bank—back home. It's one of my little hobbies. If things go on like this I'll have a pretty stack."

After I had changed I gave two dollars to the monkey and left, dragging my gear after me.

The medico made me take them to the M.P.'s office. Then he sounded me, gave me a series of injections and signed the paper which admitted me to the Chinju Training Centre.

After supper the Paymaster Captain gave me the bottle. Before the bugle sounded I was dead drunk, stretched out wide-eyed on my bed. There was enough hooch left for everyone in the hut to have a little foretaste of drunkenness.

* * *

"One, two, one, two! Up, down, up! Kneel! One, two, about turn! Section, at the double! Di Loppi and Jewell, elbows to your sides!"

The earth spun round, the sky spun round, the barracks spun round. I stumbled at each step. I trod on di Loppi's heels and at each step some son of a bitch stuck the muzzle of his rifle into my kidneys. We wore our steel helmets with the straps unbuckled, and at each step the plastic lining came away from the steel and bruised our skulls. You had to double with stiff neck and head erect, otherwise the helmet fell off and you were made to crawl under barbed wire.

"One, two, one, two!"

I ran because there was someone running in front of me

and behind.

“Halt ! ”

I did not hear the order and crashed with all my weight into di Loppi, my chin hitting the entrenching tool fixed on his pack.

“We’ll teach you, you sons of bitches ! Forward march ! About turn ! ”

My heart was pounding and I was pouring with sweat. I wept, and hated myself for weeping. It was not from pain but from rage. They wanted someone to rebel, to chuck his gun away, to spit in their faces and refuse to double. Provided di Loppi held out ! “The day after tomorrow, I thought, I’ll have money, and I’ll pay for both of us to get out of this, di Loppi and I.” The others were tough enough, but di Loppi would crack. He had just done three months in the brig. I gave my last twenty dollars to see di Loppi’s record : “Suspected of Communist propaganda. Proof: Italian origin. Wrote to his father, a Communist.”

What ate up all our strength was that our punishment was endless. When the sergeant was tired he got a relief and went off for a drink, then he took over again.

We doubled every morning before drill and every evening after supper. It might last a quarter of an hour or four hours, depending on how they felt.

I doubled because I got drunk every evening, the others because they wouldn’t let themselves be broken so easily. After Monday I shouldn’t double any more. Sergeant Boteler looked just like a top with his big haunches which sloped away towards his feet and his shoulders. He had the dirty yellow skin of a sick man. In the afternoon he invariably looked washed out. After that he took charge of the defaulters. I wasn’t able to buy him, for he

wasn't interested in money: only his little private sins interested him.

"Halt ! Di Loppi and Jewell, leave the ranks ! Up, down, up, down . . . faster ! One, two, one, two !"

Our cartridge belts crushed our shoulders. Our packs dragged us down. The fingers of our right hands, welded to our butts, were lifeless. In front of us Sergeant Boteler blew out his lungs, while behind us the others took a breather.

"Halt ! Come on, drunken bum, you on your own now. One, two !"

My body trembled like a puppet. "God," I thought, "I'd rather be in the hands of the Chinese. Is it possible for a man to reach such a pitch ?" My brains were half addled. I couldn't feel anything any more. I did not suffer, on the contrary, I felt something like a last spark of tenderness ; I had drawn closer to the world, I was quite near those who suffered hopelessly. The madman's throat was on fire.

"Halt !"

I had stuck it out. Di Loppi turned round and looked at me.

"Go back to your ranks !"

What was my suffering, I who had wealth besides those who never had anything, whom harsh life—harsher even than war—pushed around, hacked to pieces, debased and starved from the womb to the tomb ?

* * *

The camp was surrounded by barbed wire. There were only two entrances—the main gate, guarded by military police, and the back one which served for the garbage men and a few Koreans who worked in the camp. The latter was guarded according to a roster by our sections. It was the 25th May. The following day I should be paid. A

sentry stood outside near the stockade ; it was usually locked with a padlock and chain, and when at night we relieved the old guard they handed us the keys and the padlock.

Chinju is quite a small town built on one of the bends of the Nam, right at the end of a valley surrounded by hills nearly a thousand feet high. The valley is flat, sandy and fertile and covered with paddy fields. The town was not destroyed by the war but after the first Chinese offensive it suffered constant wear and tear from the flow of our troops. Our camp was built a mile from the town below the river, with an artillery repair park nearby and an air-field for light bombers five miles away. Like all Korean towns Chinju was dirty, desolate and drab. The inevitable wooden houses with Chinese roofs of plaster or corrugated iron, occasionally two or three stone houses and a place which appeared even dirtier the public square—through which a road ran when there was one. To the officers Chinju offered so few facilities that they preferred to live in the camp. Masan and Pusan were too far away. The only distraction was to watch the river flowing to the sea.

Among the paddy fields, which were terraced as they climbed towards the heights, were little peasant houses hidden in small coppices. In places you could distinguish slate-blue villages among the expanses of green and the yellow soil. The whole day long, grey smoke rose in spirals from the little huts. To the east, in the direction of the Yellow Sea, was a huge mountainous plateau which collected all the clouds that came from both oceans. Despite the distance, in good weather we could see red soil covered with brown vegetation which clambered up the sides of the mountain, whose jagged peaks cut the limpid sky. The only bright colour was an occasional pepper tree gleaming in the sun. Chinju seemed like a lost spot in a circle of mountains. From the town and the river, which two

ferryboats crossed, paths wound towards the far-off hills. For a long time you could see them climbing among the flat, watery shelves where the rice slept or among the yellow and black squares of ripening buckwheat, or cutting the fields dotted with the flat stones of Korean tombs. Sometimes the figure of a horseman trotted towards the river, or a man leaning on a stick, dressed in white with a straw hat on his head, made his way hidden to the waist up the sloping paths. The landscape quickly became depressing and you tried to thrust back the menacing hills which imprisoned you, which offered you nothing but the monotony of all those terraced lands whose scummy water beat tirelessly against the dykes.

A hut served for guardroom. There was no electricity but an oil lamp hung from a nail. All you could see through the open door was the grey embroidery of barbed wire and the sentry walking up and down like a metronome. The wind had fallen and the air was sultry. From all sides out of the night came the cries of beasts, while overhead rained down a dull noise which the sky let loose on the plain.

One by one all the lights went out. Only the lamps of the military post, blinking on the other side of the camp like weary stars crawling over the ground, remained alight. The sergeant, a tall, thin man, lay on the first bed near the door.

"You're a twat, Joe," he said.

I was lying next to him, di Lopp: was on the bed beyond.

"Why is he a twat?" asked di Lopp.

The sergeant raised one of his long arms, examining the red stone of his ring in the light of the lamp. Lost in thought as he looked at it, he forgot to answer.

"Where are you from?" he asked suddenly, tiring of stroking his arm.

"Chicago."

"A city of twats," he said.

The conversation died once more. Outside we heard the barred gate squeak, then the rattle of a chain clanking against an iron bar. In front of the door the wooden steps creaked. We stood up, holding our breaths, motionless, waiting.

"Well?" asked the sergeant when the G.I. stopped in front of him. "Didn't you find anything?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

"She's scared to come in," said the G.I.

The sergeant took a packet from his pocket.

"Give her that," he said, "and tell her she'll get more."

The man went out. Something strange was born in us. We began to breathe fast, looking straight ahead so as not to see each other.

"You're a twat," the sergeant said again. "It would have been better if we had some hootch."

"Has he really found one?" asked a voice, stressing each word nervously.

"What, a twat? Why, the world's full of them," said another voice.

"Not like these," said another. "They're set cross-wise."

The sergeant burst out laughing.

"Japanese women, but not these."

"Japanese women?" said a sceptical voice. "Where did you meet any Japanese women?"

The sergeant turned his ring to the light again and kept silent.

There was a whistle and the sentry, in an excited voice, said: "Okay, pass!"

The G.I. came out of the shadow and behind him appeared a small, frail figure. The sergeant stood up. He pushed back the sentry who wanted to come in and kicked the door shut with his foot.

I was out of breath and felt sick, as though I had just climbed a high mountain, revolted yet fascinated at the same time. Di Loppi began to tremble. He was standing awkwardly aside. He went over to the sergeant.

"You're not going to——"

He hadn't time to finish his sentence before the sergeant's knee caught him in the belly and he crumpled up.

"Kroa, tch, tch . . ." moaned the shape which had huddled back into the shadow.

"Tell her we'll give her some chocolate," said the sergeant.

The man who had been to find her said in a loud voice: "Chocolate," rubbing his belly and opening his huge mouth, and then made as if to bite something on the woman's head. Outside the sentry began to shout.

"What about me?"

I dragged di Loppi to his bed.

"Swine," he stammered "Filthy swine!"

"Yis, yis," moaned the woman, and then she began to coo.

"Get out of the way," cried the sergeant.

"Is it cross-wise?"

"Everyone in turn," cried a voice

The G.I. who had brought the woman went over to di Loppi.

"You're a silly twat. She's quite happy. What the hell? You've only got to have a go, like everybody else"

A bed bounced up and down, making the steel mattress groan. Di Loppi hid his head in his arms. I sat down next to him.

"You can't do a thing," I said to him.

"Let me be," he said, "let me be!"

To the rhythm of the mattress was mingled a damp noise.

"I'll kill the bastards," said di Loppi.

His hands stretched out to his gun which was hanging by its strap above the bed. I was sure he would do it, so I hit him because I wanted him to live, for him to have another chance, and I hit him with all my strength because I didn't know how to hit. I heard the others feverishly tearing off their clothes. Buttons cracked under their fumbling fingers.

"The tramp, the tramp, she hasn't got it cross-wise!"

The sergeant stood in front of me. His hair fell down his face, his great white, well-tended hands trembled on his belly. He took two steps and fell back on his bed.

The woman screamed softly. The man on top of her tried to stifle her cries. For a second she managed to free herself and he grew mad with rage. Panting like a furnace he began to yell.

The others, half naked, started fighting. The woman, taking advantage of the scrap, began to run and they chased her. . . .

* * *

An icy dawn. In half an hour's time it would be daylight. They were sleeping like animals. Di Loppi and I walked up and down to keep warm. On the far side of the camp the lights had gone out in the M.P. post. Only the round, quivering light of our lamp. Our hands still tingled from the warmth of the woman's body. She could not stand up. She was naked. We had to fetch her clothes. At random the men stuffed notes in the pockets. When she was dressed again we carried her out of the camp and left her in a reed thicket.

Beneath their brutality they were all in search of a little love. That's war. Dawns and twilights, cold and warmth.

In the hut the sergeant had begun to bawl. The lamp was put out. They cleaned themselves and tidied up.

From afar came a single note and then the bugle sounded reveille.

"One, two, up, down, knees up ! Get moving !"

Boteler in command.

"One, two . . . faster ! There's nothing like it to give you an appetite !"

That was our last early morning exercise. The same day we were posted.

* * *

"Pretend to move about," whispered the sergeant. "Don't stick there doing nothing." He put a water jug in my hand in which cubes of ice were swimming. "Fill up their glasses."

I felt a dope in my white jacket. They had put di Loppi in the kitchen to do the washing up : I had a better appearance, so I could serve at table. I looked at the ice floating about. At each step it banged against the sides of the jug. I wouldn't be able to get a drink before midnight. Would I be able to hold out ?

From time to time I felt them looking at me. I filled glass after glass. A few of them waved me away with a little gesture of the fingers.

I thought I should go mad. In the dining room five G.I.s had just climbed on a little rostrum with violins, clarinets and a piano. They played a little tune which left a syrupy taste in the mouth. The officers leaned back, about thirty of them, listening to the music. Beneath the light of the well-polished lamp you would have thought it was a party of old bachelors after their day's work, nibbling a little husked, predigested food with their old, yellow teeth or their gleaming dentures. The musicians watched them with gloomy eyes, drenching them with their trivial music. We others, the ten mess orderlies, giving little bows, stuffed into their mouths an insipid mess of food—purée, fruit juice which arrived in bright colours and a host of dishes which we passed under their noses as if they were strong and succulent roasts. The atmosphere was

of a poor, gloomy boarding house. I couldn't believe they had got to that state. It might have been any hotel on the east coast catering for the flower of the travelling salesmen. No, they were our officers. But what was really fantastic was that behind those simian attitudes of military apes, behind those little larvae whose pills helped their digestion, you could sense the birth—particularly here, far from the front, far from death—of the first essays at a military caste. It was crazy, it wasn't possible. All those fleshy fingers, those greedy lips and those pasty-faced young men toying with their ice cream. There was nothing left for me to cling on to.

“Take away their napkins. Make it snappy.”

Now they were standing up and moving about the room. They were the same age as myself. We had been nourished on the same things and similar incidents had moulded our lives. It wasn't possible that they could be right. I carried round Coco-Cola on a round tray.

“Here! Here!”

My God, they were going to fight. The colonel hadn't got up yet. He belched at each mouthful: he was almost a man.

“Another Coke for me!”

The music went on. Night fell on Chinju, three hundred miles away from where men were fighting. America is unsurpassed. Everywhere it has raised its pasteboard civilization to cradle these cowardly little killers. The night ran swiftly with wind and squalls. Up there men were crouching in their foxholes, but here the officers of the training centre, sucking their chocolate with delicate gestures, kept the creases in their pants. The masters of things, the knights, went off to bed.

But no, don't kid yourself. When they were alone and they felt the world pulsing and leaping to assault them they did as I did: they got drunk to be rid of the emptiness.

I was on my knees by my bed and the brandy burnt my lips.

Two captains and a major left that evening for Tokyo. The paymaster wasn't kidding me. Planes took those who wanted to go for a return trip. You paid in alcohol, in souvenirs or in cash. Sometimes a pilot, after machine-gunning the front line, on his way back to his wife in Japan, landed near the camp in search of a customer. Bunch of bloody twats!

"I'm not going back to the kitchen," said di Loppi. "You get me?"

"Not going back to the kitchen? Do you want to go back on the square?"

"I won't go back there either!"

* * *

"What's your name?"

"Jewell, sir."

"Where do you come from?"

"Hospital, sir."

"No," he said, stroking his chin. "What hotel, I mean."

"Hotel?" I asked from behind his back.

"Yes, soldier. Where did you work?"

He was tall with square shoulders and his head was covered with fair curls. His hairy body was still wet from the bath. He looked stupid and sentimental.

"Can I make your bed, sir?"

"Go right ahead."

He poured a few drops of violet liquid into a glass of water and sat down on the edge of a chair with his legs wide open.

"So you've found a soft job, huh?" he said. "How long have you been attached to the officers' mess?"

"Since yesterday."

"Funny, that. What's the weather like? I can't tell you

how Korea makes me shit, but we staff officers must pay a little visit to the front line now and again. Ha, ha, ha ! ”

He got dressed while I did the room.

“ You didn’t tell me where you worked. ” He exposed his front teeth by way of a smile. “ Do you know what my name is ? ”

“ No, sir. ”

“ Ha, ha, ha ! How charming our little soubrette is ! ”

“ Excuse me, ” I said, “ I don’t feel very well. ”

“ Tut, tut, you poor thing. Indisposed ? ”

“ . . . ! ”

Two pink hands covered with fair hair sought my shoulders.

Every time something happens which is crueller and crazier. Life can be so gay. One must learn to laugh. Life does not stop, it gives no respite. Only in the indifference of death is there repose.

* * *

The truck drove fast, hurling us all against each other. For several hours we bumped along behind the line. Thirty miles from Seoul we left the main road to join the central front across side tracks. For weeks, we were told, the whole region had been cleared of snipers, but the driver said no, there were less of them and those who remained were the best shots. I was afraid I might get scared. We had stacked the benches and were lying on the floor, I could feel cold canvas against my cheek ; I kept wondering if it was thick enough to stop a bullet. I had already forgotten how ridiculous everything was that was supposed to protect us. That went for tanks as well as trucks. Their protective value was equal only to our imagination, and the first shell made wisps of straw of them. Only the earth, the good, deep earth and the rocks could protect us. I was still amazed at the ease with which we waltzed away

from the camp. I understood the men who stuck there like limpets, preferring it to war—it is very difficult to die for nothing, for no reason at all. When the staff officer, like a sucker, closed his arms round thin air he turned pale, and it was he who did everything in his power to get me sent to the front line as quickly as possible. Someone just as charitable looked after di Loppi in the same way. All that was behind us now, lost in our memories.

Before entering the military zone a captain read us the order of the day :

The morale of the army has undergone a change. Our soldiers must never flee, never retreat. We are the best soldiers in the world, with the best equipment in the world. The Chinese are not intelligent even if they show great tenacity. Communism is a menace to the whole world and you are the saviours of civilization.

Immediately afterwards we heard gun-fire which increased in volume from rock to rock. Di Loppi thought it was a storm, but the sky was clear and full of stars. It was the last week of May.

The truck set us down on a plateau. In the peaceful night a solitary tank kept watch like a stocky bull lying in the long grass

* * *

The 23rd Regiment of the Second Infantry Division to which we were posted had been in the line since the previous night, patrolling the central front. Along with the 38th Infantry we were moving eastwards. Behind us the whole of the Second Division, with a reserve of tanks, was making its way slowly by narrow roads to new positions.

Two or three months ago none of the men of the 7th

Company, to which we belonged, would have bothered his head very much about the movements and positions of the rest of the Division, but now in order to survive each man was forced to bring out all the soldierly qualities he had managed to muster. We were becoming hunters, learning to defend ourselves and kill. By and large the officers made little progress in this direction, and the result was that each man achieved an individuality he had never known before and which he was beginning to enjoy. That's war. Had the officers been able to adapt themselves and be more flexible they could at that stage have made an army out of us—of men detached from the world who collectively had resigned themselves to being killed for a purpose. Despite our personal progress we were far from being an army; we were growing cunning, our bodies quicker than our minds learned to adapt themselves to a war which a most subtle enemy imposed on us. We soon saw that the men who commanded us were as wretched and bewildered as ourselves and that it was almost up to us to help them. From their sad uniform stream the few rare hunters disengaged themselves; the others, their redundancy adorned with stripes and medals, were as irritating as horseflies but without importance. I sometimes felt that we were trying to sort out and bring to life the elements of our approaching revolution. War is always sinister. It is a conscious and cunning crime greatly surpassing the intelligence of the men who wage it, of those who create it and of the social classes which it destroys or fosters. Happy are those who find a belief in war and who die in their dreams: the rest are merely damned men, and we bear the brand on our foreheads.

America has always sacrificed gaily, choosing with artistry her past and future dead, delving in the unstable and rootless compost of her population and seeing at last in war the unique and glorious solution for those to whom

its social structure by its greed has nothing more to offer. We feel many things and it is because we are damned that we are more sensitive. You may laugh, but life attains for us a splendour which your security will never let you know. The human adventure is bound to life and risks. Of course we waste it, burn it in the wind, but those whom the closed world of little men has betrayed still retain their generosity, and this is the mine from which the spell-binding war draws its eternal song. When one dies here, from our sufferings rises something greater and sadder than those paltry reasons which have led us into war, and that cannot fly away like glory. A warrior dies for the world.

* * *

As soon as it was day the first lieutenant distributed leaflets to all the sergeants. Whipple covered his left eye with the sheet and winked.

“Attention !”

He lowered the corner of the paper, unveiling his grey, black-flecked eye which looked at us with a bantering air. We were lying in a pocket behind the trench. Only the sergeant was standing and his helmet stuck over the edge of the parapet. He saluted.

“At ease,” he said. “Order of the day from the Commanding General——”

He paused.

“You’ll cop one if you don’t look out,” said Horner.

Whipple stood on his toes and surveyed the ground in front of the trench. A few whines from the ground in front of his nose. A Chinese bullet hit one of the steel posts supporting the barbed wire. The post vibrated and gave off a sound like tinkling glass.

Whipple fell to his knee.

“The free world is behind you, following each of your

gestures in the inferno of this battle——"

"Shut your f——g trap!" shouted the men in unison.
Whipple raised his head.

"So you don't want to hear it?" he said, but he went on: "*You are the heroes of this historic hour, the heroes of this modern age. Strength and honour to you. May God bless you.*"

Whipple sat down, folded the order of the day and put it in his pocket.

Since the previous night the main Chinese forces had been attacking somewhere to our right, to the east. We had hoped that with daylight we should be able to see something of the battle, but during the night, without being aware of it, we had climbed into the mountains and from our new position we could see nothing but a few wooded peaks overlooking a flat corridor two or three miles wide scarred by our trenches. To the east the Chinese were attacking a part of the line held by the South Koreans. This was their favourite tactic, to attack the native troops and automatically create displacements of American troops, whose staffs felt no confidence in their Korean allies.

For us of the 23rd and the 38th our only concern was to know whether the Chinese would be upon us before the rest of the Division moved up.

During our night march the captain's wireless gave the figure of 100,000 Chinese attacking above Inje. We were too tired to realize what this figure meant, but with the dawn and the increasing din of battle the figure took on more reality.

Di Loppi and I had been four days with No. 7 Company. The war dance caught us up immediately. For the first hours I was tense, dry-mouthed, analysing each noise, each breath, but very soon I grew tired and let myself sink into a torpor in which my body functioned automatic-

ally. This was the first time since leaving the hospital that I felt no hostility towards the world and the army.

Contact with the other men of the Company had estranged me a little from di Loppi. More than ever I felt a need for contact with the greatest number of men possible. Was this a presentiment of death, through which I wanted to enlarge and magnify what remained to me of life? I had the feeling that one might survive through those who were spared if only one were able, just for a second to be those others.

Once I tried to explain this to di Loppi, to explain to him how novel it was to me, and how each time I wanted to grasp this novelty it eluded me. But I knew I couldn't make him share my feelings, for it was too vague in me. It was not that I could not explain myself, it was merely that I had not plumbed my own depths. He asked me why I did not simplify it. Everything was simple for him, and he never had to struggle to arrive at his simplicity: I had chosen something which I had to experience and combat. I had chosen the unknown, and I trembled at the thought of it. But the adventure of the world goes forward. What I had left behind had been dead a long time. There is no American civilization, we represent nothing either in our past or in our future: we are the smoke of a fire that has died. It is we who will sink. We have lost. And yet I love my country and the men who live in it. I love the scent of its evenings and dawns, and my heart breaks because I do not know how to embrace all that strongly enough to give it my soul. Do you believe that I renounced my father and the land which gave me birth - that I renounced one entity in favour of another? No I suffer because I feel incapable of standing erect before them, because I love them, and the only thing a man can never deny is his land and the men to whom life has attached him.

I thought that the weariness and the bestiality of war would erase everything I bore within me, but it was not true. When I wake up at night I realize that I have been dreaming about it all. One must have courage to live, to realize the intensity of the world and its constant need for harmony and discord ; one must have courage not to refuse to be simply what one is. It is more difficult than to make war, to earn money or to fetter men by laws, and there is never any light before the end of the storm. If I return to life it will be on my own land, among the men of my race, that I will resume the combat, for I see no other possible hope.

* * *

I felt as if I had swallowed a bottle of sleeping pills. Everything was blurred, woolly and devoid of shadow. The fine rain which fell during the night had stopped. I had to open my eyes, but I put it off second after second : each time it was an eternity gained. Somebody shook my shoulder—di Loppi.

“What’s eating you ?”

A few yards away Whipple, on his knees, was looking through his periscope binoculars. His back was rounded and you could see his white hair under his helmet.

“You’ve chosen a fine time to sleep,” said Horner.

Slowly I drew back my sleeve to look at the time. Twelve minutes past five. The battle had died down. Towards one o’clock the rest of the division arrived and the tanks were behind us. The South Korean line had broken : we heard them fleeing through the wooded slope. Not a sound round us. Fourteen minutes past five. At three o’clock the engineers finished sowing mines in front of our barbed wire. Step by step they removed their markers as they left, then their trucks took them away. Whipple, huddled over his binoculars, was quite absorbed. He was

the only one in the company who could see what was going on in front of the trenches. We watched his back.

The first mines exploded opposite No. 6 Company. Immediately a noise arose like an immense wave beating on the shore, and then came their cries. The Chinese were attacking all our lines at once.

In front of us a mine went off, and then another and then another. The bursts grew nearer, throwing up sprays of earth and rock, and after each flash black patches flew upwards, then fell to earth like petals from faded flowers. The ground had been mined for half a mile in front of the three rows of barbed wire. Every minute the explosions grew nearer, without losing their rhythm. Above us we felt the blast and at times chunks of steel hurtled through the air. To the left in front of No. 3 Company the Chinese, after setting off all the mines, reached the first row of barbed wire, clambering over their dead. Our machine guns went into action, punctuated by the crack of our hand grenades. Whipple ran behind us on all fours yelling: "To your posts. They're breaking through!"

Without slowing down, without faltering, the Reds came on, wave after wave. As dozens of gutted, dismembered bodies fell back into the craters columns of men reached the next mine and in turn were blown into the sky, enabling the advance to go on. They advanced on us exactly as if there were no mines. Their courage was too gaudy a dream and their folly spread to us, preventing any idea of flight. The nearest mines to us exploded, making the three rows of barbed wire shiver. Through the dust and smoke, through the grey day which the sun could not pierce, we could see their new lines pressing forward unbroken. Beside me di Loppi's tommy gun cut a hole in the living wall, which crumbled on top of us. I took out the pin and flung my grenade as far as I could. From all sides our machine guns were firing at point blank range. The smoke

grew denser ; we heard nothing more, saw nothing more; our empty loaders slid down our knees. The waves of Chinese were impaled on the barbed wire while others passed over them like locusts. They were thirty yards away. At this point Whipple was wounded in the shoulder; his body made a leap like a fish and he fell back against me. When the first assault had been repelled blood flowed into the trenches down hundreds of gutters from a mass of piled up bodies lying there lifeless before us.

* * *

That night there was really no night. A greenish day hung over everything which lasted until dawn.

To our right the Chinese, streaming through the breach they had opened, got to the very heart of our division. To the left another Chinese army tried to break through the front at Chunchon in an attempt to reach Scoul. For a few hours our whole front, from the shores of the Japan Sea to the shores of the Yellow Sea, was ready to collapse completely. It was the tenacity and mad weight of the Red attack which, by depriving us of all sense of reality, kept us on the spot. We were too shaken out of our normal rut to react in any other way than we did.

Without respite, with the same obstinacy as the Chinese, our aircraft returned to the attack, turning night into day. Without respite the bombers loosed their bombs on the mountain slopes. They dropped high explosives which caused such a blast that our ear drums began to bleed.

When the Chinese attack was finally halted it left a wall of corpses before us which completely covered the terrain. I know those are only words, hardly credible, but what use are words anyway ? That narrow strip of ground between them and us, between their madness and ours, no longer belonged to this planet : we were on our way through cold

and empty spaces, brushing long dead stars in the limitless mass of eternity.

With charges on the end of long poles we blew up the wall of dead. In places we had to gouge out the barbed wire which was glutted with carrion. Only then could we see the massacre our mines had caused. Whipple was taken to the rear but could not get to our ambulances. We were cut off. Somewhere our tanks were trying to re-establish liaison between the division and ourselves.

Every few minutes two or three shells fell round us, just enough to make us keep our heads down. In spite of this, with our spring guns we launched reels of barbed wire which spread out like accordions as they touched the ground.

No. 3 Company called for reinforcements as there were only about a dozen men left. When we had finished propping up the crumbling walls of our shelters the second sergeant, Fletcher, made us break for food. With night-fall and the first flares it began to rain again. Every ten yards or so a sentry peered into the blinding light, which made each corpse look like a serpent crawling towards us.

"Chow. It's going to be a long night!"

Fletcher dragged a sack behind him, from which he took out rations and dropped them at our feet. Behind him came a man distributing bitter pills. No one could hear what the sergeant said. Prince squatted on his heels at my side, holding his hand to his chest: his wrist was broken and his fingers hung like strips of rag. A parachute flare burst above us, spluttering like a thousand Bengal lights. When a shell exploded near it the flare was blown up into the sky again like a star with a green tail.

It was raining. The water trickled down our helmets, down our necks, trickled on the food which our trembling hands lifted jerkily to our mouths. It was neither hot nor cold. A few yards away di Loppi's jaw trembled and his

teeth chattered noiselessly. Something black oozed from his nostrils. Horner lay face downwards. He was dead. There was no room for him in the trench, so we hoisted him up behind us and he slept on a level with our heads. Towards midnight Whipple returned. A stretcher bearer had dressed his wound and given him some alcohol. He drank a mouthful and handed the rest to Prince, holding the bottle to his mouth for him. They were sitting in the trench lengthwise, in the shadow. With them other wounded, having no place to go, waited patiently. The blood had congealed in our ears and we were even deafer.

Between three and four the Chinese attacked. Instead of dying beneath a blue and grey sky they now died in the green light of the flares. We fired blind into the moving mass. In front of me a group of Chinese, caught in the barbed wire, struggled to displace the whole sky hedge whose supports were no longer anchored in the soil. No one knew how many times before daybreak they returned to the attack.

We lay among the dead, ours mingled with theirs. They reached us to vomit their last breaths on us. Dirty little yellow men, all they managed to do was to kill di Loppi. They didn't know what they had done; they didn't know how much the death of this kid had put back for innumerable years the hope which the world bears. Behind their little fantasies they too were crazy.

It was day. About fifteen of us were trying to clear away the dead when a new wave broke over us in silence. They arrived with set lips and on their weapons they had fixed broad-bladed bayonets. We had left ours behind us as we climbed out of the trenches. Someone managed to find a tommy gun and began to fire. A few yellow men toppled forward. Di Loppi was standing firmly, trying to disengage a gun which was sticking into a chest. I cried out but he could not have heard : when at last he raised his

head the Chink was on top of him. I saw his eyes as the blade opened his neck. The yellow man stood there bewildered by his success and then he too fell. I don't know why but I felt neither disgust nor pity. At each beat of his heart the wound opened its lips and bubbled with blood. I was on my knees holding him. There was no terror in his eyes, no fear, only a sadness as if at a sudden realization of the absurdity. I knew I should never reach a lower ebb. He said something but I couldn't hear. All around us they were killing off the wounded with their rifle butts. A shell raised a column of earth which smothered us in fine rain. I tried to protect his face. When I opened my eyes I had a black, unknown face next to mine. Then I took him in my arms and, by the light of the flares, carried him across a field of dead to our line and laid him down next to those whom the night had devoured. Di Lopp, whom everyone in the world, including his own brothers, had made to suffer.

Then the tanks, which had finished their work in the rear, came up. They entered the battlefield and drove straight over our trenches. Their tracks wallowed among the piles of flesh; they snapped up the bodies and whirled them their entire length. When they got to the centre the tanks wheeled to the right and charged the Chinese flank at full speed. They were not impressed. In droves they rushed on the tanks, trying to smash the tracks with their grenades and guns. This was what our men were waiting for to open fire with their machine guns, exterminating the Chinese, who hung like flies to their sides. The caterpillars passed and repassed over them, crushing breasts, breaking limbs, pressing into the soil what never should have come out of it. When the five tanks returned they were red from the tops of their turrets to the bottoms of their bellies, and in their wake they left a dew of blood.

Early afternoon and no attack for six hours. No one knew what we were going to do. The din had abated. Our clothes were stiff, like shells in which our white bodies rattled. A lieutenant with round, mad eyes came to ask the sergeant how many Chinese dead there were. Without looking up Fletcher said: "Three thousand, sir." The lieutenant wrote the figure down in a notebook and disappeared with a nod. Some time later he returned. The figures he had given for the length of the front seemed dubious to the general staff: now we had to count the dead. Fletcher took five men and set out. For a time we watched them counting, then they began to blaspheme. It was an impossible job, for there wasn't a single body that remained whole. They came back and that was the end of that.

In a few hours night would fall. We had just been told that as soon as it was dark the front would fall back to a new line of crests. They brought us some warm chow. The lieutenant did not return. Apparently, alone in a shell hole, he had strangled himself with a length of barbed wire. We fixed our entanglements again just to be on the safe side. As we had no gloves our hands were torn to pieces I would have given anything to bite into some real bread and chew it lustily. I was hungry and nothing else mattered.

* * *

"My name is——"

"I don't give a f—— what your name is. Or who you are or where you come from."

"Okay," he said "Smoke? . . ."

"Aw, shit. You give me a pain in the arse."

He shrugged his shoulders. There was just enough light for me to see him. He was about nineteen

"How long have you been here?"

"Three days."

The sergeant had put him on last watch with me before we retired. A yard away in front of us lay a dead Chink.

"Where were you last night?"

"With the divisional reserve." He tried again, gently: "My name's Conway."

"And what's that one's name?" I asked.

He drew in his head and did not want to look at the dead man. I raised his chin.

"Look," I said. "Look at him."

"No, no . . ."

He began to blubber. The Chinaman was lying on his back with his head on one side. His eyes were closed and his mouth was wide open. His dark, sleek hair, shortly cut, was plastered with blood. From behind his neck several brown streaks had trickled round one ear, making a sinister mask of his smooth face. His shirt stuck through the open collar of his grey tunic, whose pockets had been turned inside out; the linings looked like handkerchiefs. His two clenched fists made a bridge above his hollow chest and the left sleeve had a tear several inches long. Round his jacket collar was a black scarf which passed under one armpit, and to this he had attached a cord which held his gun on his back. A little above the spot where the cord was attached to the weapon the wood and metal had been broken off clean. His left leg was straight and rigid, the other was folded under his crutch with the foot turned inwards. He wore dark trousers crossed in front like a skirt. On his feet a pair of rubber-soled canvas shoes such as basket ball players wear, with no laces and no socks. Near his head lay a cigarette and a box of matches. Two strands of barbed wire had fallen over his body like brambles, clutching his pitiful garments.

"Look at him. He's only a stiff."

"Yeah, a dirty yellow man. A dirty yellow bastard!"

He raised his head and looked at him.

"Did you see his gun?" he asked. "What a bunch of twats!"

He felt stronger.

"So your name's Conway?"

"Yeah. What's your?"

"Jewell."

"Are they going to attack again?"

I did not answer. He had a pointed hypocritical face with freckles, and I could see the marks left by chicken pox. I squatted down and lit a cigarette which I held in the hollow of my hand. Fletcher sat down beside me. In front of us we could see the dark parapet of the trench and the young soldier's feet. I handed my cigarette to the sergeant and we sat there in silence as night fell. A little later we left "Hell Gorge" and by scented paths, beneath a starry sky, passing tigers and other wild animals perhaps, we climbed up to our new trenches.

* * *

We marched, day after day, night after night. We trotted downhill, up paths leading to the crests, we trotted across narrow plains dominated by bare, red mountains. We marched and we fought. We were like dancing dervishes who, by spinning round, had reached a state of giddiness and apathy. We became machines without reaction, and it was not army discipline that was to blame but simply the war; it sat on our shoulders, offering us its only caress—indifference. Nothing could surprise us any more, nothing could make us quail; we had pretty well all it takes to make heroes. Wound up as we were we could have killed no matter whom, no matter how. Whether the guy in front fell or a truck loaded with our men was blown sky high we went on at our little jog-trot and nobody bothered to think when it would end.

In less than a week the war had undergone a change.

It rained non-stop. Storms, squalls and then a glimpse of clear sky with a hot June sun which dried us before the rain started again. After two days it did not bother us any more. It soaked our clothes, trickled all over us and we no longer felt it. If during a few seconds of lucidity you looked at the column of soaking men you seemed to be seeing a flock of indifferent animals floundering, trotting aimlessly. Weariness had robbed us of our lone soldier whims and we no longer looked for a personal solution. As long as we were fighting on the spot, defending fox-holes and trenches, we made some effort in this direction. But now that we were on the march, plunging in all directions, we lost the moral support which the idea of flight can give for we were going round in circles. The mountains formed an immense arena in which the Chinese and ourselves were hacking each other to pieces, neither of us able to find a way out. From the high walls that imprisoned us our wardens urged us on, driving us ceaselessly with whiplashes. That is the true picture of war. We were all jumbled up together and we killed each other while the world cried in ecstasy as it watched us.

For the last few days we had begun to take prisoners. The general staff wanted us to believe that this was the first sign of the Chinese crack-up and of our victory. All I knew was that the Chinese artillery was now as powerful as ours, that on all sides we stumbled on their mines and very often we could no longer avoid their tanks.

Fletcher was standing with legs spread on the road. I was lower down at the end of a field. Between him and myself was a ditch full of Chinese lying on their bellies with their arms above their heads. It was a maize field and green sprouts rose from the brown water-logged earth. Behind me Quinn and Brailowsky were searching the huts. Everything depended on them. If they found a hidden Chink they had to fire and then Fletcher and I would shoot

at once into the grovelling mass. One of the Chinese raised his head ; like a swimmer he flung out his arms towards the road and the others imitated him. There were a score of them. With the butt of his gun Quinn was ransacking the huts. Fletcher lowered his gun slowly towards the nearest yellow man's head, pointing his left hand threateningly at him.

"There's no one here," cried Quinn.

Further off Brailowsky searched in some hayricks and a pile of rotting maize stalks. He raised his gun : that meant we were not to fire. It was always a risky business, and as a matter of fact they would be more trouble than they were worth. To finish them off would perhaps have cooled our rage, but we had let the moment pass when we could have done that. We shouted for them to get up. They were all without caps except one. A little colour appeared in the sergeant's cheek and his nostrils were no longer pinched.

"We're going to have a fine time with them," said Brailowsky, climbing back on the road. "Do we bump them off?"

Quinn looked at me. The field stretched away in the distance almost to the horizon. Here and there on the flat ground a few yellow mounds glistened in the rain and nearby on a hill, were the silhouettes of trees. Everything was damp, oozing water. The day before a Chinese ambush had killed five of our men, including our last captain, a tall guy with a beard.

"No," said Fletcher. "We're taking them back."

They trotted on ahead of us and we followed, our tommy guns under our armpits. The warm rain beat on our helmets and trickled down our necks. A few of the Chinese had rolled up their trousers and they looked even more miserable than us. We were too tired to frisk them, there were too many—and what did it matter anyway? The

road narrowed and the mud swallowed up our boots. It was bordered with thick bushes which climbed up the sides of the gorge. The prisoners must have felt we were getting nervous, for they crossed their hands over their heads without being told. Several of them had lost their shoes. They went on with the others, hopping along, without looking back. The one with the cap was in the rear. He had an almost intact jacket while the rest only had shirts hanging down over their trousers.

"We're twats," said Brailowsky. "The battalion is twice as far as our positions. If we'd bumped them off we could have gone straight back."

"Perhaps we'll get some warm chow back there," said Fletcher.

Somewhere we heard the rattle of a vehicle driving between branches. We stopped. The Chinese continued forward. At that moment, fifty yards away, a jeep covered with branches, leaves and mud appeared. From under the hood came several flashes. The Chinese fell like rabbits, screaming. Those who had not fallen turned round and rushed on us.

"F——g twats!" cried Fletcher.

Brailowsky fired a burst which stopped them. The jeep bumped along towards us.

Quietly the Chinese put their hands above their heads again.

"Is that you?" cried a voice.

"Yes, sir."

A major leaped out of the jeep

"You're from No. 7 Company?"

"Yes, sir."

"What are you doing with those guys?"

"Taking them back to the battalion," said the sergeant.

"No, you go back to the line," said the officer. "I'll take them down."

Only one had been hit, quite a young one with bald

patches on his head. The others took him by the arms and legs. The major ordered the driver to turn round and drive behind the column.

"Faster," he cried. "Faster!"

The yellow men began to run, their shaved heads bobbing above the jeep, the major, half out of it, yelling and waving his tommy gun. We waited for them to disappear, standing there motionless in the rain, which had begun to fall more heavily.

"So you got your hot chow, okay?" jeered Brailowsky.

"Would it have helped you any to kill them?" said the sergeant.

And we set out again.

It was late afternoon when we left the road to cut across the woods. It was getting dark. From the trees, from the leaves, torrents of water spuled down on us. A kind of rage began to bubble within us: when we got to one hilltop we were under the impression that our positions must be on the next one. After an hour we were lost, without any bearings. We could hear artillery fire but couldn't locate it: it seemed to be all round us. Quinn, who stopped for a second, got lost. We only realized it much later. Then, holding each other's hands, we went back, feeling our way round the tree trunks and giving little shouts. At last we came across him. He had stayed in the exact place where we had lost him. Just before dawn a patrol from the 2nd Company picked us up and took us back with them.

They were well installed. They had turned over some gasoline trucks and were living inside them. They even had clean, dry straw. We undressed in the darkness and huddled against each other. Our teeth began to chatter and we shivered with our elbows pressed to our sides, but despite the cold and the damp we fell asleep. Later I was awakened by a feeling of suffocating heat. We were in

a mucksweat and a whitish cloud of steam floated above our heads. When I opened my eyes it was day. I had a filthy taste of gasoline in my mouth. We had the greatest difficulty in putting on our clothes, which were like wrung-out washing. A sergeant took us in a jeep to No. 7 Company. There nothing had changed. Fletcher and I found our hole—a bit of trench reinforced with sandbags. At our feet the plain, to right and left the woods, the rocks and other holes like ours. We took off our clothes and rolled ourselves in blankets. In quick succession, beginning with the lieutenant, people came to visit us. We had already been written off as dead.

Towards eleven o'clock the sun came out. Swoboda, the second sergeant, warned us we would be moving that night.

Fletcher was beside me, opening a can of beef. The company armourer had just brought our weapons, cleaned and greased, with little transparent paper caps attached to the muzzles. Our clothes hung on a machine gun tripod, steaming in the sun. I closed my eyes and felt a current of warm air rising from the plain. The sergeant chewed and handed me the can of meat. We were lying in the hole and from time to time a bullet whined before burying itself in the sandbags. Fine weather. A bullet had just hit the binoculars on a nearby parapet. They were flung in the air and came to rest on Fletcher's belly, who began to laugh.

"Feel them," he said. "They're warm."

Some distance away a bullet killed a sentry. There were cries. The body was taken from the hole and carried away.

"Say . . ."

Fletcher's voice was hesitant.

I closed my eyes. I didn't want him to talk. I didn't want to be involved in whatever it was. I would do any-

thing in the world for them, but I didn't want to share in all their deaths.

"Are you asleep?" he asked softly.

My cowardice hurt and I felt I was blushing, but at last I got out the words: "No, what is it?"

"Conway was killed last night."

The warm air filled my lungs. I thought I was suffocating.

"He was a volunteer."

I lay back.

"What the hell do you think that matters to me?"

"Why are you crying, then?" he asked.

In the sunlight I could see the outline of the property with the white fences and the big door on which were nailed the horseshoes of my grandfather's first team. All the lands my family had won belonged to me. I had never desired them so much as now, and yet it was no longer the same thing. I was in Europe when my father signed the deal with the financier in New York. The farm buildings were razed and the fields amalgamated. Three thousand acres in the hands of one tenant . . . When I returned there was nothing but the house, the lawn and the big gate which had not changed. The rest had become a great factory smoking among the fields. It was because of this that my father never looked me in the eyes at the station, or ever after that.

"Times have changed," he said at table, keeping his eyes on his wife's breast. "That's modern agriculture, and we can't do anything about it."

Then he spoke of the expenses I had incurred. I had nothing to say. The exploitation of the land brought in over a hundred times more than before. At the end of the week I left for France, for my mother's family. I was sick of America's vulgar laughter. Among all that wealth I had no place where I could settle. I never saw my father

after that. From time to time I received a letter from him, which I left unopened. One evening, I don't know why, I took a plane for New York. When the taxi braked to turn into the drive I was ready to pass out with joy. There was nobody at home: my father and his wife had left for the Argentine on a second honeymoon.

Then I was called up. First of all I was sent to a camp in South Carolina. My father wired from Buenos Ayres to the senator and his brother-in-law to have me entered as soon as possible in an officer's training corps. From Carolina I was sent to a camp in the state of Washington. There were nearly three hundred of us, all from fairly rich families. When I had to go before the commission which approved our entrance to the school I handed in my resignation. I don't know why I did it, but in the camp I had discovered the life of others--real life. I didn't want any more privileges. If I couldn't abandon my class because I was born in it, the only thing that remained was to fight it. In spite of the distance my father went crazy. After a few days under observation in hospital I was sent at the express request of my father to a disciplinary battalion.

At first my rage gave me strength to survive and to take stock of myself. Little by little I got to know the loneliness of a man delivered without defences to a society he tried to reject. I was on the other side of the fence: I was mixed up with those whose despair was feared because it might drive them to revolt, those who were isolated from the chaste and sugared world so that they might be exterminated. And it was there that I began to love the mysterious and potent world which surrounds us. After having succeeded in sloughing the dreary and blasé pattern of my former life, after becoming acquainted with despair, I thought I understood the miraculous meaning of the future. A narrow concept perhaps, but we were men without a god. In men alone could we place our hopes. I

wanted a strong and unique voice to support and carry me away. That was impossible. Truth is a stumbling thing, going from one pole to the other and we are made up of a series of setbacks and victories. Whoever in the hell of human solitude is allowed to live can never turn back against men.

It was the hour when the day tractors came in from the land and the night tractors were ready to start out. The corn was already high. The harrows, gigantic in the crude light of headlights, brushed it delicately. Why was it so magnificent to live and to die?

* * *

Our five tanks, the trucks and jeeps, had stopped on the river bank. We were half-way up the hill and they looked like huge toys below us. We waded up to our thighs through tall, coarse grass, and at times the bushes wrapped their pliant stalks round our chests, forcing us to break into a trot. The sky was clear and pale blue. To the east the sun gilded the chain of mountains on the far side of the river. At their foot, clumps of trees stood out green against the violet wall. Every thirty or forty seconds red flashes spurted from the clumps of trees, driving before them blinding swords like molten steel; they streaked towards us, glinted, then fell into the water, raising milky, silent ripples.

Since dawn the Chinese batteries had found the range and were firing phosphorus shells at us.

After the massacres of the past few days the Chinese, unable to pierce our lines, had begun to withdraw and it was now our turn to chase them. No. 1 Company arrived at the river's edge. We could see their tiny figures among the tanks. A Chinese shell exploded on solid ground near us and the hit made no more noise than a piece of chalk dropping on a desk. We passed a company of South

Koreans crouching in the grass. Yesterday at nightfall, before leaving our trenches, we were handed out new jeans, rations and as much ammunition as we could carry. At the dawn halt most of the men wanted to wash and shave on account of their new clothes.

Our tanks dispersed along the river's edge. On all sides our trucks tried to find cover from the Red fire which grew more intense. Fletcher had given me a pair of semi-laced boots. My canvas blouse smelt good. The fact of feeling clean helped things a lot. At each step I wanted to stop and look at some tree, some flower or the whole picture of the river meandering indolently between the mountains. But the shells were falling nearer and Fletcher and Swoboda whistled for us to scatter. A reconnaissance car had just been hit. It lay on its back and short, red flames came from its wheels.

"Press on, press on," cried the sergeant.

One of our tanks got a direct hit on a battery. A column of black smoke swirled above a clump of trees as the ammunition blew up in all directions. The weather was too marvellous to wage such a futile war. What marvels we were wasting and denying ourselves in a single day. But why deny it? War has its own mystery and poetry, and we were caught up in its charms. Our gestures had a certain generosity and what we tamed in ourselves was always rather like the end of a journey or an adventure. I sometimes felt that beneath our brutalities, our coarseness and our crimes the combat brought out the magnificent dark poetry of men, and I knew that in spite of them the world would demand its future from all that was born of our cries. It would need millions of years for humanity to realize what it was and what potential it had. For this reason the death of a man is never useless.

When the first tank reached the middle of the river the water came over its turret. We did not hear the explosion.

The tank rose in the water, seemed to waver for a second in the current before diving with its tail in the air. Its long gun stuck in the sandy bed, tearing off the turret and opening an enormous hole through which the water swept. The overturned monster began to sink, its belly in the air, imprisoning its crew. We could do nothing about it. For a few minutes we saw the blue steel gleaming in the current, then, dragged down by its weight, it disappeared for ever as the waters closed over it. We had to search higher up for a ford that was not mined. The water was cool and flowed gaily past us. We advanced in file with our arms outstretched. The ford was deep and the water came up to our necks—the little guys had to swim or be dragged along, yelling, by the taller ones. When the stronger current in the holes raced through our blouses and pants we laughed.

On the far bank a second tank and an ambulance blew up together. When the dust cleared away we saw the ambulance piled up on the turret of the tank which was burning quietly. The three remaining tanks and all the rolling stock were left behind until a mine disposal squad was available.

After crossing the mountain range we reached the road and the noise of battle hit our ear-dums like a blast of air. A railway line appeared way down below the road. For hundreds of yards the embankment had been destroyed by bombs, leaving huge clefts in which the rails reared up like ladders. We were a few miles south of Chorvon on the Chorvon-Seoul line. Squadrons of planes droned overhead without cease. From our height they began to dive on their objectives.

“What bloody mugs we were not to have taken a bath in that bastard river,” said Quinn. “Can you imagine lying starko in the sand with the water rushing over you? Look, there are some cherries.”

"Are you nuts?" said Fletcher. "Have you ever seen cherries without stalks?"

At that moment an automatic weapon sent a spray of bullets over our heads. All down the column officers and N.C.O.s began to shout: "Take cover against the embankment."

As one man they flung themselves on the ground. The machine gun stopped firing. There were only a few isolated rifle shots whose bullets ploughed up the ground. Automatically, with a jerk of the shoulder, we had unslung our guns.

"On your feet," cried Fletcher. "Get moving!"

We pushed on with lowered heads. A convoy of trucks came up behind and began to overtake us. Against bonnets, against canvas hoods and wooden struts we heard the dull or ringing thud of bullets. We were linked to a chain which at every second dragged us nearer and nearer into the fighting, plunging us into its tremors, its cries and its spasms. I undid the straps of my pack and flung it in the truck. The others followed suit. I only kept my water bottle, my ammunition, my weapon and two grenades. In bounds, doubled up, we went forward under cover of the embankment. The trucks passed us and disappeared.

After a few hundred yards the embankment gave place to a concrete wall. All along it were broken weapons, bundles of open dressings and gutted packs. The wall stopped short, leaving an open space of about forty yards before beginning again. Just before the breach three of our trucks were on fire. From the wheel of one of them a calcined driver looked out at us.

I tore open the press studs which fastened my water bottle. I fell on the ground next to Quinn. Above the noise of the battlefield we could hear the whistle of Chinese bullets sweeping the road ahead. There had been hand to hand fighting with grenades at the exact place where

the company had just stopped. Crawling forward, Fletcher and Swoboda approached the breach only to scuttle back. There was nothing else for it: we had to get across. The water was warm but Fletcher snatched the bottle from my hand. A trace of fear appeared in our eyes. We were ashen and each of us tried not to tremble, tried to keep a stiff lip.

"Come on kids," said Fletcher, "we can't stay here."

"No, no," groaned Quinn. "Let's wait for the tanks."

Fletcher grabbed him by the shirt, picked him up and shoved his face close to his.

"Don't start anything," he said.

I had to be on my feet before Fletcher turned round, for there are certain things you just can't do. I couldn't hold back any longer, couldn't be afraid as a moment before. Like a wounded animal peering out of the grass, I got to my feet. I was like a broken old man. A bunch of men were huddled at the edge of the breach, getting ready to run for it. There were the two sergeants besides Quinn and Bartholomew. My carcass wouldn't dream any more; this was the real, the effective life. It was my turn to die.

"Hold on!" cried Swoboda.

But I couldn't stop, couldn't even run. My feet dragged. A bullet hit the cartridge belt on my shoulder. Under the impact the hooks broke and the loaded steel band slid down my chest like a snake. Another bullet split my boot sole in two, peeling it off. This was the moment to scream out my love for war! Mug that I was. I knew nothing, understood nothing. Let someone guide me and explain it to me. I had made it. Through my moist eyes I could see a blurred group running towards me. It exploded and dispersed. I came out of my shelter and began to fire on my knees. That was what I should have done instead of dreaming. I fired dispassionately, feeling no hatred for

them. I merely wanted them to let us pass. That was war, that was the only solitude—the greatest of them all.

The Chinese stopped shooting. Quinn lay on his back with his mouth open for eternity, with a little hole in his chest. Fletcher was on his feet and one of them brushed against Quinn's forehead. Swoboda and Bartholomew were crouching. We dared not move. Then another bullet, and another. It knocked off Fletcher's helmet and the third tore off the upper part of his forehead. It hung there like an open drawer, held on by the scalp. He turned towards us with what remained of his face. A quick shudder of his torso and he fell on Quinn.

We marched in double column along the road, which was so dry that our feet disappeared in the dust. We were just two lost columns among thousands of others making our way to the front line.

I had taken Quinn's boots and dumped my new split pair. We found no photographs, letters or addresses in Fletcher's pocket; he had even erased the engraving on his identity disc. All we found was a tiny red star. We had not even time to bury him. I took his water bottle and we left. The water tasted of quinine. I nearly took the star but on second thoughts put it back: it was the only thing that really belonged to him, that he had chosen. It was too late now. Why had I been afraid to talk to him?

It was five o'clock and the sun was still high. We were dropping with fatigue. We had to stop to let an armoured regiment through, so we flopped out on the ground. Our feet rested on a bank and our heads on sparse, dusty turf. Every minute the rumble of tanks shook us. Our limbs were welded together and the sky could have fallen on us for all we cared. A man had put a handkerchief over his eyes; the wind lifted it up and blew it towards me and then into the air. A truck passing at great speed made the stones fly and one of them hit me on the shoulder. What

more could I do? I had just learned that in spite of everything I wanted to live. Someone made a move near me: in a few minutes we would be starting off again. A jeep pulled up. It was an M.P. radio car. A nasal voice asked for information and you could make out the metallic whisper of the reply. Perhaps we'd been forgotten and we could stay out of the fighting for another quarter of an hour. More cars passed, and more tanks. There was no end to them.

We were woken up by a reconnaissance plane which crashed in a nearby wood. Then we set out in the direction of the flashes and the cloud of dust which covered the lines.

We shot and were shot at. And we marched backwards and forwards, opening our cans of food between times. And when our guns and rifles were worn out they gave us others and it began all over again. In spite of that there were a few really beautiful June days and slowly the battle, which was known as "The Battle for the Iron Triangle," died of inanition.

* * *

"Can't you keep in line? What's your name?"

The corporal shone his torch on a sheet of paper.

"Oh, yeah, it's you. A truck will pick you up at mid-day, but until then you'll do like the rest."

I went back to my tent, got my rifle and returned to the ranks. The sun had not yet put in an appearance and we felt a lot of hoboos in our clothes which we didn't have time to press. The corporal read out the names of the men one by one in the breaking light, and we lined up in a queue before the cooker. Later I went back to bed, choosing the darkest corner of the tent. After a few minutes I saw the shape of a soldier in the shadow.

"What the hell are you doing there "

"Waiting for a truck."

He lit a cigarette and chucked me the packet. About ten o'clock a lieutenant came into the tent.

"What do you think you're doing lying there? The chaplain's going to take the service outside."

"The service?"

"Yes, the service. It's Sunday."

He went over to the tent flaps and lifted them to see better.

"I'm not going to church parade."

"Are you a Jew?"

"No, sir."

He bent down closer.

"You're not a negro?"

I did not answer.

"What's your religion?"

"I'm waiting for a truck sir, and I'm not in your company."

"What's your name?"

He repeated it twice and then went out.

"Attention!" roared a voice

There was a clatter of feet and the clicking of a hundred pairs of heels.

"At ease."

"On this day of the Lord we are going to pray," went on the same voice.

At that moment somebody called my name. I went outside and stood there blinded by the sunlight.

"Are you the guy from the 23rd? Here are your papers," said a captain. "My car's going down. You can go with it."

In front of a dozen well-polished, gleaming tanks sat the Company, each man with his buttocks in his helmet, listening to the sermon.

"In those days the army had no system of supply such

as we have . . . There was no commissariat providing the troops with C and B rations . . . ”

“Do you feel okay ? ” asked the captain.

The driver helped me to load my gear in the car. Slowly we drove behind the tanks. The Company had stood up and they were singing with wide open mouths.

Far away in the direction of the mountains, beyond the thick woods, beyond the rivers, the sky brought to us the din of warfare. Once we were under way the motor drowned the distant noise and we slipped towards the south in the cool breeze.

Before midnight a naval truck set me down in Pusan and I spent the night in an M.P. post with another guy like myself. Their jeep had broken down and we could find no one to take us to the depot.

As soon as it was daylight we set out on foot. The air smelt of the sea. A trail of clouds drifted through the pale sky and several columns of smoke rose above the town. Despite the early morning hour the streets were full of people—refugees for the most part, carrying bundles and, as everywhere in Korea, mainly women, old men and children. From time to time our transports, driving at speed, forced us to the roadside or up against the houses.

Near the harbour, in a quarter of wooden huts, two plump children fought with some mountain pigs for empty cans. The children ran up to us, took our packs and weapons and led us through the town to the depot.

An officer took our papers and a sergeant took away our clothes and our packs. There were hot showers and cakes of white soap. My face and my hands up to the wrists were black and sunburnt. At every noise, every time someone banged against the pipes, I jumped. Each time a motor back-fired outside I looked for a hole.

A Korean cut our hair and shaved us. The scar on my cheek was almost invisible—a pale line with a few points.

We were given new clothes, a doctor examined us and then we ate.

At five o'clock we were lined up in the courtyard by companies. Consulting their lists, the N.C.O.s split us into groups. It was then I realized that in the left corner where I stood was all that remained of my first regiment.

Two ranks in front of me I saw a man I had known. I seemed to recognize the attitude, rather resigned yet ready to rebel. When we were finally dismissed the man turned round and made his way limping to the first hut. It was Clay.

So this war was over for both him and me. I moved my stuff over to be near him, but we didn't talk. We stayed lying on our beds until we grew sleepy. Near us the others, after a few drinks, tried to raise a song but they too were unhappy.

* * *

The following day Clay took me out of the town to the military cemetery. In front of us walked a dozen old gentlemen with pointed beards, dressed in black satin jackets and wearing curious top hats. Coolies behind them humped leather bags with bronze locks.

Ross was killed a few hours after I was wounded on the other side of the river. His body was brought back here before being shipped to the States.

Of the whole Company, which had climbed with such ease to the Manchurian frontier, we were the only two left.

Clay had changed terribly. His head was cropped, which accentuated the thinness of his face. When we had done looking at the little mound of earth with its white cross, when we had done suffering by thinking of Ross, we returned to camp. We let the sun and the changing sky of this foreign country bring us back to life.

"Well, there you are," said Clay. "I'm going back to

my water meters. The water service is lousy, you know. You hardly see anyone, and the meters are nearly all in cellars—and the porters and watchmen are a lousy lot, too. The guys who read the gas meters see a bit of the world. Not me."

"I know. You told me."

He chuckled.

"But what you don't know," he said, "is that I'm a pretty good stretcher-bearer. It was grand doing that. And where are you off to?"

He took my hand and I did not answer.

* * *

Four thousand men. We were lined up on the quayside. Our shoes shone, our trousers had straight creases and our blouses fitted. We had neither helmets nor rifles. What had we, then, before our eyes? What remained in our memories? At our sides were our kitbags and the few things we were taking home. Behind us the boat dragged on the bollards with the tide and we could hear the heavy gangways squeaking and brushing against the quay.

Fifty paces away a general was reading something out. Then he saluted us. At intervals the sirens of U.S. Transport No. 3 holed. A few minutes and we should be on board. We the soldiers of the 20th century who fought without faith. Towards what unknown goal were we going? All of us knew that this was far from being the end of the war. None of us would mention it or cry out our despair. No one would want to believe us. How many of us had found hope and were returning to it? The ventilators purred as they breathed the clean air of the sea. The last cable hit the side of the ship. Asia lay behind us. The 18,000 h.p. of three turbines drove the heavy ship forward. The bows, like a steel wall, had just raised the two first waves which would slip with us as far as another land.

That is my story. I didn't know where I was going, but I was richer than before, and if men were willing to accept me I would go with them to the end.

The flags were hoisted. The loudspeakers announced supper. On the bridge, above the short steel masts, the radar grids turned, looking for the invisible, and over the calm sea the portholes released for a few moments the sugar-sweet, insipid smell of white men and their universe.

Translated from the French of *Les Amants de Seoul*
by MERVYN SAVILL.